

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNIQUE AND  
IDEAL IN DIDEROT'S *SALONS* (1759-1767)**

**LE DÉVELOPPEMENT DU RAPPORT ENTRE TECHNIQUE ET IDÉAL DANS LA  
CRITIQUE D'ART DE DIDEROT DANS LES *SALONS* (1759-1767)**

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requirements for the degree  
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**I hereby declare that this dissertation, unless otherwise indicated in the text, is my own original work. This research has also not previously been submitted to any other institution for degree purposes:**

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## ABSTRACT

The art criticism of Denis Diderot (1713-1784) shows the development of a complex theory of beauty in which he worked towards a proper understanding of those factors that contribute to the beauty of a work of art, both in terms of its composition and of the way it engages the viewer. This art criticism would prove to be significant to posterity in that it represents the first true example of what is now called modern art criticism. As a man of letters who took an exceptional and unprecedented amount of trouble to educate himself in both the history and the rules of art, both through independent study and through constant interaction with the foremost artists of the day, he learned to evaluate art in terms of its technical excellence (what he called “la partie technique”, or technique of painting) and in terms of its ability to stir the emotions through the originality, imagination and almost undefinable magnetism of its content (what he called “la partie idéale” or content). It was through his constantly-developing understanding of this dynamic that Diderot became the first writer to formulate a detailed methodology for a criticism and appreciation of art. It is in our view important to establish how and why Diderot’s understanding of this dynamic developed and to make this the object of a single study. The dissertation was conducted through the textual analysis of five *Salons* (1759-1767) and employed theories by Bourdieu and Barthes as theoretical frameworks. The study found that while Diderot perceives technique and ideal to be two separate and warring entities in the early *Salons* of 1759, 1761, 1763, they have, by the end of the *Salon de 1767*, become two parties in a symbiotic relationship, with the mastery of technique being the gateway to the mastery of ideal.

## SOMMAIRE

Pour mieux comprendre les éléments qui contribuent à la beauté d'une œuvre d'art, c'est-à-dire, la composition d'une œuvre et la manière dont elle inspire le spectateur, Diderot (1713-1784) a développé une complexe théorie de beauté dans sa critique d'art. Cette critique est importante pour la postérité, car elle représente le premier exemple de ce que l'on appellera la critique d'art moderne. Homme de lettres, Diderot a pris des mesures exceptionnelles et sans précédents pour s'instruire au sujet de l'histoire et des règles de l'art. Grâce à ses études, effectuées indépendamment et en compagnie des grands artistes du jour, il a appris à évaluer l'art en fonction de sa supériorité technique (appelée "la partie technique"), et des émotions que l'originalité, l'imagination, et le magnétisme indéfinissable de son contenu pouvaient provoquer chez le spectateur (appelée "la partie idéale"). Sa compréhension de l'interaction entre le technique et l'idéal était toujours en évolution, et a mené le philosophe à établir une méthodologie détaillée pour la critique et l'appréciation de l'art. Dans le cadre d'une étude dédiée seulement à cet aspect de l'œuvre critique de Diderot, nous nous sommes proposés d'établir comment et pourquoi ce rapport entre technique et idéal a développé du point de vue du philosophe. Pour atteindre ce but, nous avons effectué une analyse textuelle de cinq *Salons* (1759-1767) en employant comme cadre théorique des théories de Bourdieu et de Barthes. Notre étude a démontré que dans les *Salons* dit "formatifs" (1759 ; 1761 ; 1763), Diderot perçoit que le technique et l'idéal sont deux éléments autonomes. Cependant, dans les *Salons* de 1765 et 1767, nous avons démontré que le technique et l'idéal doivent se lier d'une manière interdépendante pour créer une belle œuvre d'art : un beau technique est nécessaire pour avoir un bel idéal.

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I would also like to extend a special thanks to my family, especially my mother. Thank you for all your love, support and unfailing tolerance of my outbursts conducted at strange hours on the other side of the country. Thank you, too, for your considerate acceptance of the constant presence, in my life, of a garrulous, three-hundred-year-old man with a cheeky smile. I'll try to leave him behind the next time I come home.

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<sup>1</sup> This acknowledgement is an adaptation of the opening lines of the *Salon de 1763* (Assézat X : 165).

## **DEDICATION**

For my father.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Diderot and the *Encyclopédie* : an introduction to the socio-intellectual climate of eighteenth-century France

On the eighth of March 1759, Chrétien Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, *directeur de la Librairie*, and censor of the written word in France, sent a warning to Denis Diderot that his papers were about to be seized. For the second time, the *Parlement de Paris* had banned the *Encyclopédie*, the great compendium of knowledge that had consumed Diderot's life for more than a decade (Beaurepaire 2011 : 399). "L'avantage qu'on peut tirer d'un ouvrage de ce genre, pour le progrès des sciences et des arts", the *Parlement's* proclamation read, "ne peut jamais balancer le tort irréparable qui en résulte pour les mœurs et la religion"<sup>2</sup>. The royal privilege under which the *Encyclopédie* was published was revoked, the immediate seizing of Diderot's papers was ordered, and Pope Clement XII called upon all Catholics to burn their copies on pain of excommunication (Beaurepaire 2011 : 399). Diderot, angry, frustrated and panicked, responded to the secret warning Malesherbes had taken such risk in sending him by storming into the latter's home and demanding to know how the *directeur* proposed to evacuate so large an enterprise as the *Encyclopédie* in twenty-four hours. The reply was that Diderot should hide all documentation relating to the *Encyclopédie* in Malesherbes' house. The residence of the censor was the last place that anybody would think to look.

This is the kind of ironical episode that is typical of eighteenth-century France (Beaurepaire 2011 : 400). It is testimony to the mad contrariness of an era in which the king sat at Versailles alternating between the issuing of *lettres de cachet* and attempts to dissolve parliament, while in Paris, men and women of intelligence gathered in the apartments of society hostesses to speak and dream of a new world in which knowledge and tolerance would triumph over religious fundamentalism and absolutism, and where the serenity of reason and civilised debate would exercise a calming influence on destructive passions and the clouding of judgement that often accompanies them. It is because of this turning away from the old order of superstition and persecution towards a time of questioning, learning and

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<sup>2</sup> French sources are quoted in the original language, where possible.

common sense that the eighteenth century is called the Age of Enlightenment, or the *Siècle des Lumières*.

The eighteenth century's rationality and rejection of undue sentiment, which Clark eloquently calls "the smile of reason", often leads to the unjust and erroneous conclusion that in comparison with other important epochs in human history, the Age of Enlightenment is something of a cold fish :

[The smile of reason] seems to us shallow (...). We feel that people ought to be more passionate, more convinced – or, as the current jargon has it, more committed. Indeed, the civilised smile of eighteenth-century France may be one of the things that has brought the whole concept of civilisation into disrepute. This is because we forget that in the seventeenth century, with all its outpourings of genius in art and science, there were still senseless persecutions and brutal wars waged with unparalleled cruelty. By 1700 people had begun to feel that a little calm and detachment wouldn't come amiss. The smile of reason may seem to betray a certain incomprehension of the deeper human emotions ; but it didn't preclude some strongly held beliefs – belief in natural law, belief in justice, belief in toleration. Not bad. The philosophers of the Enlightenment pushed European civilisation some steps up the hill, and in theory, at any rate, this gain was consolidated throughout the nineteenth century. Up to the 1930's people were supposed not to burn witches and other members of minority groups, or extract confessions by torture or pervert the course of justice or go to prison for speaking the truth. Except, of course, during wars. This we owe to the movement known as the Enlightenment (Clark 1969 : 245).

Clark makes it clear that the seventeenth century, which despite the remarkable advances in art and science that had characterised it, had done much to discourage a spirit of debate and questioning in society. The society of eighteenth-century France, though still led by the monarchist *ancien régime* and dominated by the Church, was very different from that of seventeenth-century France. Its advancement of knowledge, questioning and detachment from excessive emotion was a direct result of and reaction to the horrors of the century that had preceded it. This advocacy of reason did not, however, prevent eighteenth-century thinkers from having "strongly held beliefs", nor did it confine these thinkers to heartless emotional detachment in their daily lives :

The eighteenth century is normally represented as a rational century, coherent, a little cold and detached, but this image, bound up with the way in which modern tastes perceived the painting and music of the epoch, is decidedly misleading (...) Beneath the frigid and aloof veneer of the Age of Enlightenment, there ran a tumultuous undercurrent of unbridled, violent passions in a world where men and women were as refined as they were cruel. We might say that in the eighteenth century the persistence of Baroque Beauty was justified by the aristocratic taste for giving oneself over to the sweetness of life, while the austere rigour of Neoclassicism was well suited to the cult of reason, discipline and calculability typical of the rising bourgeoisie (Eco 2010 : 237-239).

It is indeed difficult to imagine the man who stormed into Malesherbes' house demanding help in evacuating the *Encyclopédie* as being subject to a rationalistic doctrine that entirely excluded emotions. But, as has been observed above, the intensity of sentiment demonstrated by Diderot on that day was by no means incompatible with the practice of sound reasoning at that particular time. It is the eighteenth century's simultaneous rationality and passion, in domains as diverse as natural history, social satire and art criticism, that makes it such an extraordinary and complex era in human history. Its coinciding acknowledgment and reigning-in of emotion create the ideal climate for a society based on debate and questioning ; a climate that Beaurepaire describes as being characterised by "effervescence" :

La France des Lumières se singularise par une fièvre de chaque instant, une extraordinaire effervescence. Effervescence économique (...) effervescence démographique (...) effervescence administrative (...) effervescence également lorsque le public, qui a progressivement pris conscience de la toute-puissance de l'opinion, convoque à son tribunal les grandes controverses et les grands débats, malgré les foudres de la censure (2011 : 6).

With the word "effervescence", Beaurepaire captures the eighteenth century's teeming intellectual and social energy. This energy, this "effervescence", simmered constantly and energetically beneath an increasingly fragile socio-economic surface as larger numbers of the French public than had ever been seen before became able to debate, to engage (Beaurepaire 2011 : 749), and thus to battle against the censure and intolerance practised by an increasingly disconnected monarchy. This battle was not fought with muskets, flame or artillery on the streets of Paris : all that was to come later. Rather, it was fought with words in the homes of Parisian society hostesses like Madame du Deffand and Madame Geoffrin.

These women, extraordinary in that they were valued by society for their intellect rather than for their beauty or wealth, invited cultured individuals and men of letters from all over Europe to their apartments to participate in lively and informal intellectual discussions. In so doing, they instituted an idea that was to become vital to the fostering of culture and literature in France : the idea of the society salon<sup>3</sup>.

To the twenty-first century mind, with its tendency to connect intellectualism and snobbishness and its instinctive dislike of conversation not conducted on the screen of a smartphone, the idea of the society salon does not seem particularly interesting, or indeed particularly revolutionary. And yet the integral role the society salon played in the fostering of debate and the rejection of systems made these intimate gatherings of intellectuals vital to European civilisation :

Solitude no doubt is necessary to the poet and the philosopher, but certain life-giving thoughts are born of conversation, and conversation can flourish only in a small company where no one is stuck-up. That is a condition which cannot exist in a court, and the success of the Parisian salons depended very largely on the fact that the court and government of France were not situated in Paris, but in Versailles (Clark 1969 : 252).

In the environment of the society salon, people felt free to express their opinions in a way that would not have been possible at the court of Versailles. Indeed, consider Clark's comment that "to this day I enter the huge, unfriendly forecourt of Versailles with a mixture of panic and fatigue – as if it were my first day at school" (1969 : 252) ; an impression that evocatively captures the manner in which the mere atmosphere of Versailles made it an unlikely place to encourage free conversation. Versailles was a separate world from Paris, and was referred to by its residents as *ce pays-ci*. It was a world that did not tolerate outsiders, or the expression of outside opinion. Its citizens were not interested, or indeed aware of the conditions or opinions of people other than themselves. To the aristocrats who lived their entire lives at Versailles, the very notion of French society being or ever becoming anything different from the absolute monarchy exemplified by Louis XIV's famous declaration of "*L'état, c'est moi*", or "I am the state" was unthinkable. This rigid and reactionary way of thinking naturally made it difficult, if not life-threatening, to express

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<sup>3</sup> This word has three different meanings in the context of this thesis : "salon" refers to a social gathering, "Salon" refers to the biennial art exhibitions held by the *Académie Royale de Peinture*, and "Salon" refers to Diderot's published criticism of paintings exhibited at these exhibitions.

opinions at Versailles that were contrary to the norm, and the stifling court rituals that occupied most of a courtier's day made normal human interaction and the conversation that results from it, a rarity. It is for this reason that the society salon proved to be such a success in the fostering of debate : at a salon, one could converse with (or argue with) one's fellows in a pleasant environment, without fear of persecution and without the lack of honesty and fear of offending that often characterises a formal environment such as Versailles :

The salons where the brightest intellects of France were assembled were (...) luxurious, but still not overwhelming. The rooms were of a normal size, and the ornament (for in those days people couldn't live without ornament) was not so elaborate as to impose a formal behaviour. People could feel that they had natural human relationships with one another (Clark 1969 : 254).

By virtue of a thing as natural as being able to have an informal conversation with another person, the salons came to replace Versailles as the great sources of taste and ideas in France. By attending the salons, one subscribed to the world of the mind rather than the world of court procedure, (Clark 1969 : 252) and it is because of the philosophical character of these salons that the greatest spirits that attended them and subscribed to their values were popularly known as *les philosophes*. It is immensely important, however, to note that those who attended the society salons in order to participate in "la conversation brillante" did not fall into the category of individuals slothful enough or rich enough to idle about all day talking about philosophy. Their aims were about rather more than attending these salons because such gatherings were fashionable :

The people who frequented the salons of eighteenth-century France were not merely a group of fashionable good-timers : they were the outstanding philosophers and scientists of the time. They wanted to publish their very revolutionary views on religion. They wanted to curtail the power of a lazy king and an irresponsible government. They wanted to change society. In the end they got rather more of a change than they had bargained for, but that is often the fate of successful reformers.

The men who met each other in the salons of Madame du Deffand and Madame Geoffrin were engaged in a great work<sup>4</sup> – an encyclopedia or *Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et*

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<sup>4</sup> Clark is employing poetic licence in this instance : it is unlikely that every single salon attendee had contributed to the *Encyclopédie*, though a great many had. It is, however, safe to say that the overwhelming majority of people who attended the salons supported the *Encyclopédie*'s ideals.

*des Métiers*. It was intended to advance mankind by conquering ignorance (Clark 1968 : 256-257).

What an extraordinary thing, and how different from the thinking of the seventeenth century, this notion that a book could bring about the change that French society so desperately needed. The goals of the *Encyclopédie* were to :

Rassembler les connaissances éparses sur la surface de la terre, d'en exposer le système général aux hommes avec qui nous vivons (...) afin que nos neveux, devenant plus instruits, deviennent en même temps plus vertueux et plus heureux, et que nous ne mourions pas sans avoir bien mérité du genre humain (Assézat XIV: 415<sup>5</sup>).

In collecting knowledge of every kind imaginable, and in making such knowledge available to everyone, the *Encyclopédie* hoped to make mankind more educated, and through education, to bring happiness and virtue to the world. The *Encyclopédie* achieved its goal in seventeen gigantic volumes of articles and eleven volumes of illustrations containing three thousand plates. In total, the *Encyclopédie* comprised seventy-two thousand articles across twenty-five thousand pages (Beaurepaire 2011 : 7), and survives to this day, despite the French monarchy's fervent attempts to curtail its influence :

The aims of the *Encyclopedia* seem harmless enough to us. But authoritarian governments don't like dictionaries. They live by lies and bamboozling abstractions, and can't afford to have words accurately defined. The *Encyclopedia* was twice suppressed ; and by its ultimate triumph the polite reunions in these elegant salons became precursors of revolutionary politics (Clark 1969 : 260).

The *Encyclopédie* project was too large and too ambitious to succeed without a pilot of some kind, and though the *Encyclopédie* had many contributors, it cannot be denied that "the dynamo of the whole undertaking was Diderot" (Clark 1969 : 257). Popularly known simply as *le philosophe*, Diderot saw the *Encyclopédie* through both of its suppressions and it was because of his persistent dedication and clandestine work accomplished across two decades that the *Encyclopédie* still exists, unmutated, today.

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<sup>5</sup> References to the *Œuvres Complètes* of certain authors name the editor of the cited edition of the *Œuvres Complètes*, followed by the volume number and the page number of the volume in question.

The *Encyclopédie*'s publisher Le Breton, whose accomplishments include the near-destruction of the enterprise by striking all controversial information from the work's proofs, made an uncharacteristically good choice in selecting Diderot as editor<sup>6</sup>. The philosopher was suitable in terms of character, temperament, and the diversity of his philosophical leanings and publications before the advent of the *Encyclopédie*. Born in Langres in 1713, Diderot was the eldest of the seven children of a cutler. He showed little talent for the family business, and his father intended him for the church, even going so far as to have Diderot's hair tonsured when the boy was twelve years old. Diderot was an excellent if badly-disciplined student, first at the Jesuit College of Langres and then at the Collège d'Harcourt<sup>7</sup> in Paris, from which he graduated in 1732. His desire to take up philosophy rather than religion caused him to become estranged from his father. The consequences of this estrangement were the adoption of a bohemian lifestyle for the next ten years, and this period in Diderot's life is poorly-documented as a result. What is known, however, is that in the course of these years, Diderot ceased to believe in God, though the circumstances of his loss of faith are not known<sup>8</sup>. He also made his way through a number of professions. For two years he worked for a prosecutor. He wrote sermons for an ecclesiast, taught mathematics (which he readily admitted he knew nothing about), became a tutor in the house of a financier and entertained notions of becoming an actor. He was often without money, food or board, and yet it was in these years that he made some of the most important acquaintances of his life, notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1742, and through Rousseau, his lifelong friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm. In 1743, detailed information about Diderot's life once again comes to light, thanks to a decision on the part of Diderot's father to have his son imprisoned in a convent in order to prevent his marrying Antoinette Champion, a washerwoman. Diderot, with characteristic tact, escaped, eloped and brought about an unhappy marriage (Wilson 1970 : 38) that lasted for forty years.

From the varied nature of the professions adopted by Diderot before his marriage, as well as from the large number of acquaintances he made during this time, the philosopher acquired invaluable experience of eighteenth-century life and a persistent curiosity about people. He

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<sup>6</sup> In the early days of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot was not sole editor, but shared this responsibility with the brilliant mathematician and philosopher Jean Le Ronde d'Alembert. D'Alembert removed himself from the project after the *Encyclopédie*'s second suppression in 1759.

<sup>7</sup> Diderot's attendance of the Collège d'Harcourt has not been definitively proved.

<sup>8</sup> The insanity and eventual death of Diderot's sister from overwork in a convent are often cited as reasons for his loss of faith. This incident would also come to play a role in the composition of Diderot's novel *La Religieuse* (Wilson 1972 : 14).



would have seen first-hand the ignorance, sometimes wilful, sometimes not, that existed in French society and been driven to think of ways that this ignorance could be overcome. This last point is demonstrated by his atheism and the denunciation of religion as ignorance that characterises atheist philosophy. Furthermore, the conquering of ignorance, particularly ignorance brought about by religion, is a common theme in Diderot's own philosophical writings both before and directly after taking on the editorship of the *Encyclopédie*. In 1746, Diderot published his *Pensées Philosophiques* ; a violent attack on Christianity in favour of *la religion naturelle*. He was given the direction of the *Encyclopédie* in the same year, and in 1747 continued to protest against religion in *La Promenade du sceptique*<sup>9</sup>. Diderot's religious faith continued to decline dramatically, from deism to scepticism and finally to materialism (Wilson 1970 : 58 & 560).. This favouring of materialism was famously exemplified in the essay *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* (1749) and gave the authorities, who had long been looking for an excuse to arrest him, ample cause. He was incarcerated in the Château de Vincennes from August to November 1749. Though his sojourn in prison did little to change Diderot's opinions, it did teach him caution in the expression of them ; a skill that was to prove vital when writing the *Encyclopédie* . The authorities, for their part, were not fooled by the philosopher's sincere promises to behave himself, as is evidenced by this police report on Diderot from the years 1748 to 1749 :

Nom :	Diderot, auteur (...)
Age :	36 ans.
Pays :	Langres.
Signalement :	Moyenne taille et la physionomie assez décente (...).
Histoire :	Il est fils d'un coutelier de Langres. C'est un garçon plein d'esprit mais extrêmement dangereux (...).

Auteur de livres contre la religion et les bonnes mœurs (...).  
C'est un jeune homme qui fait le bel esprit et se fait trophée d'impiété, très dangereux. Parlant des saints mystères avec mépris, il disait que lorsqu'il viendrait au dernier moment de sa vie, il se confesserait comme les autres et qu'il recevrait ce que l'on appelle Dieu, qu'il ne le fera point par devoir, mais par rapport à sa famille de crainte qu'on ne leur reproche qu'il est mort sans religion (Beaurepaire 2011 : 387).

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<sup>9</sup> Diderot also produced work in this period with non-religious themes, including the libertine novel *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* and the mathematical treatise *Mémoires sur différents sujets de mathématiques*.

It is fascinating to observe Diderot's qualities as a quintessential child of the Enlightenment through the lens of the *ancien régime*. His intelligence and wit, which might have been admired had he used them to advance the cause of the king, are viewed as admirable but hazardous : he is twice described as being witty, but extremely dangerous. He is pronounced to be a proud infidel (“[il] se fait trophée d’impiété”) and as being the author of “livres contre la religion et les bonnes mœurs”. Diderot's distaste for religion is described as reaching its apogee in an anecdote that seems to have come from an informant, in which the philosopher declares that he would receive absolution on his deathbed. This sudden change of heart would not come about from a desire to redeem himself, but to spare his family from the censure that would result were he to die without religion.

Diderot's life and writings before the *Encyclopédie* demonstrate his suitability to serve as its editor. His bohemian life during his initial estrangement from his father, the life experience that the period brought him, together with the many diverse acquaintances he made during that time, would have created in him an awareness of what French society was, but above all what it could be. His philosophical writings of the period show a wish to challenge the narrowmindedness and intolerance that he believed were brought about by the dominance of religion in French public life. His non-religious writings, such as his novel *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* and his mathematical treatise *Mémoires sur différents sujets de mathématiques*, demonstrate his diversity of thought and ability to express it. And his time spent in the Château de Vincennes shows the ability (if not necessarily the willingness) to go to prison for his ideas. Thus, Diderot's qualities, works and the facts of his life all contribute to his fitness to serve as editor of the *Encyclopédie* and to embrace all that that entailed. As Clark observes:

He was a many-sided man of high intelligence, a novelist, a philosopher, even an art critic (...) and in the [*Encyclopédie*] he wrote articles on everything from Aristotle to artificial flowers. One of his charms is that you never know what he is going to say or do next (1969 : 260).

It is true that in the course of writing the *Encyclopédie*, particularly in its later years, when all work was conducted secretly, Diderot was frequently obliged to write articles on subjects about which he knew absolutely nothing, an example being artificial flowers. It is equally true that in such articles, and also in articles dealing with subjects with which Diderot was familiar, Aristotle being one of them, he never lost the ability to surprise or confound the

reader. Diderot was certainly highly intelligent and versatile and could express himself comfortably in a variety of literary forms. It is unfortunate, however, that Clark chooses to present Diderot's art criticism as an afterthought warranting the addition of the word "even" to the sentence in which it first appears, as though writing about art were a strange eccentricity that Diderot had tried one day and forgotten about the next. In the wake of the second suppression of the *Encyclopédie* in 1759, when Diderot was depressed, angry and vulnerable, the philosopher did a friend a favour by critiquing the paintings exhibited at the *Académie Royale de Peinture*'s biennial art exhibition. Diderot would return to each of the *Académie Royale*'s art exhibitions for the next twenty-two years. By the time of his last visit in 1781, he had authored a body of aesthetic works that is as significant to modern art criticism as the *Encyclopédie* is to freedom of thought. These works, and the exhibitions they stemmed from, were called *Salons*.

## **1.2 A brief history of the Salon in France**

The *Académie Royale de Peinture* owes its creation to Louis XIV's highly significant and effective decision to incorporate all forms of art, literature and culture into his absolute monarchy. The primary aim of this campaign would be for the arts to play as important a role in the king's display of his splendour as the battles he won and the laws he created. A secondary, though no less important aim of the campaign, was to rival, and eventually to surpass Italy as the artistic and literary capital of Europe (Lojkin 2007 : 29).

This new, state-led emphasis on the arts was to result in some of the greatest cultural wonders of France, including the Palace of Versailles, and would take place in every domain of the fine arts. To ensure that the paintings produced by French artists in the era of Louis XIV remained splendid representations of France's glory, the *Académie Royale de Peinture* was formed in 1648 (Lavezzi 2007 : 97) and strict rules drawn up to maintain a high standard of painting in France. Two of these rules concern us here : the bringing into effect of the hierarchy of genres, and the royal decree requiring the regular exhibition of *Académie* members' work.

The hierarchy of genres may be defined as a system whereby genres of painting were classified according to their perceived superiority. History painting drew inspiration from classical and religious literature, and its portrayal of the nobler human emotions of pity and fear ensured its status as the most important genre of painting. Second in line came genre painting ; a broad term that itself implied a hierarchy. The most prestigious form of genre

painting entailed the depiction of scenes of ordinary bourgeois life, whereas portraiture, landscapes and still life, which were not thought to require much skill, were placed squarely at the bottom of the scale (Lavezzi 2007 : 66).

Another important rule instituted by the *Académie* at its foundation took the form of a royal decree. This decree ordered every member of the *Académie* to exhibit his work at the institution's annual general meeting, to take place in July. The *Académie* transformed this rule into a biennial process and tradition (Lojkin 2007 : 29), and it is to this that we owe the formation of the first Salons.

Louis XIV made his power felt in these first Salons. The king's portrait was always present, gazing down authoritatively at the other paintings as though to remind the *Académie* that it existed at the king's discretion and for the king's glory (Chouillet 1984 in Musée du Breuil de Saint-Germain, Langres 1984 : 15). However, from 1725, by which time Louis XIV had been succeeded by his great-grandson Louis XV, the focus of the Salons shifted from the king to the participating artists. This change was brought into being by the Duc d'Antin, *directeur général, surintendant des bâtiments du roi*<sup>10</sup>, who introduced the awarding of prizes at the Salon to encourage the creation of good history painting. In so doing, the Duc d'Antin transformed the Salons from a royal prerogative into a place of creativity, where artists, and competition between them, were greatly encouraged (Lojkin 2007 : 36).

The Salons very soon formed an integral part of the *Académie*, as it was only by exhibiting that an artist could hope to be received into the *Académie* as an *académicien*. The prizes instituted by the Duc d'Antin also played a vital role in the *Académie* itself, as they maintained a high standard of painting within the *Académie* and in those hoping to be received into it.

Membership of the *Académie* was the only way that one could hope to work as a painter in France, and to profit from royal commissions and regular exposition at the Salon (Chouillet 1984 in Musée du Breuil de Saint Germain, Langres 1984 : 16). In consequence, the process of applying for membership of the *Académie* was very clearly defined. The first stage required an artist to present a work of art called a *morceau d'agrément*. The *Académie*'s acceptance of this work guaranteed the painter a kind of observer status within the organisation : he could attend meetings, but was not permitted to vote or to participate in

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<sup>10</sup> A powerful financial position in the king's ministry.

decision-making. Such privileges were only granted with full membership, applications for which were only permitted two years after an artist's submission of his *morceau d'agrément*. A painter wishing to apply for full membership was required to submit a second work of art called a *morceau de réception*. If this work was accepted, then the artist achieved full membership of the *Académie*. The artist's *morceau de réception* would be exhibited within the *Académie* itself and then at the Salon. The characteristics of those *morceaux de réception* that were accepted and exhibited at the Salon were duly noted by each successive generation of aspiring artists, so that the Salon came to play an integral role in the style and genre of paintings that were favoured by the *Académie*. This does not mean that the Salons, and their importance in *Académie* politics, were universally accepted by artists. On the contrary, they remained a divisive topic among artists for their entire duration. The *Académie* itself could not protest the existence of the Salons : to do so would be to defy a royal decree, and to miss the opportunity that the Salon provided to publicly justify its own existence. This reasoning could not, however, prevent individual artists from objecting to the Salons. Prominent artists like Fragonard, Greuze and Boucher all refused to exhibit in certain years : Greuze in particular earned the derision of Diderot for refusing to exhibit in 1767 in order, Diderot claimed, to avoid the acerbic tongues of the public (Lojkin 2007 : 47-48).

The public, which proved to be a vital part of the Salon experience whether for good or ill, was not initially allowed to attend the exhibition. The first Salon, which took place in 1665, was not open to the public, and only members of the *Académie* were allowed to see the paintings on view. The public was only permitted to enter the exhibition in 1667, when Colbert, Louis XIV's all-powerful finance minister, visited the Salon and declared it to be important enough to take place every two years. Despite Colbert's approval, the Salons were not initially held with the consistency that the minister might have liked. The growing number of exhibitors caused several dramatic changes of venue, from the courtyard of the Palais-Royal, to the Grande Galerie of the Louvre and finally, to the place that Diderot knew and worked in, the massive Salon Carré of the Louvre. In addition to problems relating to venue, it was not uncommon for gaps of more than the prescribed two years to elapse between Salons, until 1751, when it was decided that the exhibitions should take place every second year, beginning on the *jour de la Saint-Louis* (August 25<sup>th</sup>) and lasting one month (Belleguic 2007 : 30-31).

The scene that played out in the Salon Carré at each one of these biennial exhibitions, attended by Diderot and by such a large part of the Parisian public, was extraordinary. The sculptures were placed at the centre of the room, and the engravings at the window frames. As for the paintings, they were hung from floor to ceiling with no spaces between them (Lojkine 2007: 51).

How vastly different is this from the emphasis placed on curatorship today :

On est très loin de la muséographie contemporaine. Il ne s'agit pas d'isoler une œuvre sur un grand mur blanc savamment éclairé, de concentrer le regard et l'attention des spectateurs sur un objet, et dans cet objet sur un point unique vers lequel pointerait éventuellement l'écrin d'un commentaire. Le mur du Salon Carré est un espace multiple duquel il revient au public d'extraire ce qui va faire sensation et retenir l'attention générale (Lojkine 2007 : 51).

This highly claustrophobic eighteenth-century museography naturally led to a great deal of internal politics and diplomatic (or non-diplomatic) disputes between artists regarding the placing (or non-placing) of their work in prominent places. Chardin, the great painter of still-life, was *tapissier*, or curator of the Salon space. While he executed his work with prodigious patience and diplomacy, the manner in which he hung the paintings was “ni chronologique, ni logique, ni hiérarchique” (Lojkine 2007 : 51), an unfortunate fault that the otherwise-adoring Diderot often criticised in him. Another strange difficulty brought about by Chardin's curatorship was the impractical manner in which the paintings were labelled. The Salon walls were empty of the titles of paintings and the names of the artists who had created them. Each painting was accompanied by a number, which a salon-goer would be required to look up in the Salon's *livret* in order to access the relevant information about both painter and painting. Diderot soon made use of this fact to ridicule Doyen's *Andromaque éplorée devant Ulysse* : “Mais, Monsieur Doyen, vous avez abandonné votre première manière de coloriser. Jamais sans le livret je ne vous aurais reconnu dans ce tableau” (Assézat X : 215). The *livret* was the cause of a great many other problems at the Salons. Occasionally, a painting that arrived late to the Salon would be omitted from the *livret*'s pages. Conversely, it was not uncommon for works that had never arrived at all to be listed despite their absence. The legibility of the *livret* numbers assigned to certain artworks also went into significant decline the higher up on a wall a painting was placed and the process was rendered all the more onerous by the sheer difficulty of locating what one was looking for in the chaotic sea of artwork (Lojkine 2007 :

52-54). Orienting oneself was a characteristic challenge of attending the Salon and Diderot, admittedly a very intelligent man, often lost himself.

There was no question of attending the Salon alone in order to engage in the solitary contemplation of art. Entrance was free, and the exhibition attracted a very large crowd : 15 000 people in 1759 and approximately 35 000 in 1781 (Belleguic 2007 : 3). The sheer size of the crowds of people attending the Salon often made it difficult to get anywhere near the most popular paintings : notable examples include Greuze's *L'Accordée du Village* in 1761<sup>11</sup> and Fragonard's *Corésus et Callirhoé* in 1765<sup>12</sup>. The Salon Carré was not only crowded with people, but with their opinions, both erudite and inexperienced. Diderot's friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm often lamented the indiscipline of the Parisian public in loudly expressing extravagant opinions that had little basis in artistic knowledge and that caused offense to artists and critics alike (Belleguic 2007 : 4).

Salon-goers debated and not-infrequently disagreed with one another, and Diderot regularly reports instances of disagreements that he has heard or had with certain groups of people in front of certain paintings. There was no rule of absolute quiet, because the Salon was very much what Belleguic calls "un espace public de plus en plus jaloux de son autonomie" (Belleguic 2007 : 4) in which debate was common and encouraged. One can imagine Diderot spending hours<sup>13</sup> revelling in the chaos, arguing with other attendees while scribbling notes on his *livret* and occasionally confusing himself with contradictory opinions scribbled on different *livrets* during different visits.

### 1.3 Introduction to Diderot's *Salons*

Having described the conditions under which Diderot took notes for his *Salons*<sup>14</sup>, it should be explained why Diderot's writings on art are so important. Seznec accurately sums up the importance of Diderot's *Salons* to art criticism :

Diderot, infusant sa vitalité à un genre timidement traité par Lafont de Saint-Yenne, l'abbé Leblanc, Caylus, Fréron (entre autres), et par Grimm lui-même, va véritablement créer la critique d'art en France (2007 : 10).

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Sophie Volland dated 19 September 1767, Diderot reports having spent seven hours at the *Salon* : "Mardi, depuis sept heures et demie jusqu'à deux ou trois heures au Salon ; ensuite dîner chez la belle restauratrice de la rue des Poulies" (Assézat XIX : 236).

<sup>14</sup> The actual writing would take place in his *cabinet* at the end of each day.

It was not merely art criticism in France that Diderot was to remake, however. He was to remake the entire concept of art criticism, and turn it into the genre it is today. According to Lavezzi :

Diderot a inventé la critique d'art littéraire en érigeant le compte-rendu de salon en genre. Mais, quand en 1759, Grimm lui demande de se charger du salon pour la *Correspondance Littéraire*, la théorie d'art, la critique d'art, l'esthétique et l'histoire d'art existent déjà, bien que ce soit à l'état confirmé, naissant ou embryonnaire (2007 : 8).

As stated by Lavezzi, it is important to note that before Diderot's *Salons*, art criticism certainly existed, but had not undergone sufficient development to be considered a literary genre. While a great many newspapers and periodicals like the *Mercure de France*, and art writers like Etienne La Font de Saint-Yenne also covered the Salons, their reviews of these exhibitions were often confined to simple descriptions of a work, or to pure and unengaging technical analysis. In his *Salons*, Diderot certainly discussed the technical aspects of a work of art, but was able to present such analysis at the same level of literary accomplishment as the writer of a novel. In so doing, Diderot created a form of art criticism that constituted the first example of the independent review in art (Milam 2011 : 95). Thus, it is through his creation of the independent art review, as well as his pioneering of a methodology of art criticism through his interpretation of the "couple technique-idéal" (Lojkine 2009)<sup>15</sup>, that Diderot's work is considered the genesis of "modern" art criticism.

Diderot's first *Salon* came about through the philosopher's friendship with Friedrich Melchior Grimm, a German who had arrived in Paris in the winter of 1748 as reader to the Prince of Saxe-Gotha. It was in this capacity that Grimm made the acquaintance of another of the Prince's employees, Diderot's great friend Jean-Jacques Rousseau<sup>16</sup>. As a newcomer seeking a political career in Paris (Lojkine 2007 : 60), Grimm was in dire need of useful acquaintances. Though Rousseau himself had little taste for society of any sort, he was quite aware that his friend Diderot, with his flamboyant and outgoing personality, had more acquaintances, both useful and not, than could be counted. Rousseau introduced the two men, and was soon lamenting the decision in his *Confessions* : "Je les liai ; ils se convinrent, et s'unirent encore plus étroitement entre eux qu'avec moi" (Rousseau 1782 : 373).

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<sup>15</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>16</sup> Diderot and Rousseau had a fervent friendship until an incomprehensible dispute in 1759 made them enemies.



The friendship with Grimm was the greatest of Diderot's life. As Cammagre observes, "Grimm fut, après la rupture avec Rousseau, l'ami au masculin singulier, comme Sophie<sup>17</sup> fut l'amie au féminin" (2007 : 181). The friendship was both passionate and emotional, as is evidenced by these two extracts from Diderot's letters, the first to Sophie Volland, the second to the sculptor Falconet :

Quel plaisir j'ai eu à le revoir et à le recouvrer ! Avec quelle chaleur nous nous sommes serrés. Mon cœur nageait. Je ne pouvais lui parler ; ni lui non plus. Nous nous baisions sans mot dire, et je pleurais. Nous ne l'attendions pas. Nous étions au dessert quand on l'annonça : "C'est monsieur Grimm". – "C'est monsieur Grimm !" repris-je, avec un cri, et je me levai, et je courus à lui, et je sautai à son col. Il s'assit ; il dîna mal, je crois. Pour moi, je ne pus desserrer les dents ni pour manger ni pour parler. Il était à côté de moi. Je lui serrais la main et je le regardais (...) On en a usé avec nous comme avec un amant et une maîtresse pour qui on aurait des égards. On nous a laissés seuls dans le salon. On s'est retiré ; le Baron [d'Holbach] même. Comment cet homme a-t-il eu la délicatesse de sentir qu'il était lui-même de trop ? Il faut que notre entrevue l'ait singulièrement frappé ([9 October 1759] ; Assézat XVIII : 397).

Celui que j'aime, celui qui a la mollesse des contours de la femme, et quand il lui plaît, les muscles de l'homme ; ce composé rare de la *Vénus de Médicis* et du *Gladiateur*, mon hermaphrodite, vous l'avez deviné, c'est Grimm ([6 September 1768] ; Assézat XVIII : 268).

Perhaps one can hardly blame the Baron d'Holbach for being "singulièrement frappé", nor indeed for evacuating the salon after dinner. Diderot's interactions with Grimm are, as Lojkin observes, characterised by "[une] complicité privée, littéralement amoureuse" (2007 : 69) and the philosopher's letter to Falconet has more in common with a love poem than with a letter to a friend. While Diderot's sexuality is not the object of this dissertation, it is nevertheless important to understand the intense nature of the relationship between these two men, who were soon to embark on a collaborative project that would prove to be of some importance to the notion of modern art criticism.

The principal work of Grimm's life did not turn out to be political, as he had intended, but literary, for it is as editor of the *Correspondance Littéraire*, a magazine detailing the cultural and intellectual life of Paris, that he is remembered. The *Correspondance Littéraire* was an

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<sup>17</sup> Sophie Volland was Diderot's long-time friend and mistress.

unusual publication in that it was not printed : copies were handwritten on loose sheets of paper without margins. This unusual format had an interesting purpose :

C'est précisément parce qu'il s'agissait d'une revue manuscrite que ses collaborateurs pouvaient formuler des opinions critiques dans les domaines culturels et politiques que la presse imprimée ne pouvait se permettre du fait de la censure (Bukdahl 1984 in Musée du Breuil de Saint-Germain, Langres 1984 : 23).

This freedom of expression afforded by the handwritten word immediately conjures up visions of the clandestine presses of the French Revolution, but the *Correspondance Littéraire* was nothing so populist. It was distributed only to a small number of royals and crown-heads all over Europe including Friedrich the Great and Catherine the Great (Milam 2011 : 95) and the number of individuals receiving it at the time of the first *Salon* was in the region of only seventeen (Bukdahl 1984 in Musée du Breuil de Saint-Germain, Langres 1984 : 23). The *Correspondance Littéraire* was also protected by its being presented in such a way that each subscriber had "l'impression d'être le seul lecteur de ces feuilles" and a condition of subscription was keeping the publication's existence a secret (Cammagre 2007 in ed. Cammagre and Talon-Hugon 2007 : 29). Thus, the *Correspondance Littéraire* was able to escape the indignation both of the censor and of whichever royal happened to be reading it, and in this way, contributors to the manuscript, including Diderot, were not required to exercise their habitual restraint in the expression of their opinions :

La confidentialité de la revue garantit la liberté de jugement. Diderot n'a pas à se soucier des réactions que provoqueront ses jugements (...) Il a le champ libre pour de violentes diatribes, notamment les diatribes anti-chrétiennes des *Essais sur la peinture*. Feindre d'ignorer que ses comptes rendus auront d'autres lecteurs que Grimm lui garantit enfin la possibilité d'une grande liberté de ton : le critique n'est pas corseté par l'exigence de défense qu'imposerait l'adresse directe à des Grands de ce monde (Cammagre 2007 in ed. Cammagre and Talon-Hugon 2007: 30).

The first allusion to Diderot's potential contribution of art criticism to the *Correspondance Littéraire* occurs in a letter to Grimm, dated 2 September 1759 :

Avant que de sortir de la ville, j'irai voir le Salon ; s'il m'inspire quelque chose qui puisse vous servir, vous l'aurez. Cela n'entre-t-il pas dans le plan de vos feuilles ? Commandez ; je vous obéis assez mal, mais il ne m'en coûte rien ([2 September 1759] ; Roth II : 241<sup>18</sup>).

There is strong evidence, however, to suggest that the notion of asking Diderot to contribute art criticism to the *Correspondance Littéraire* had occurred to Grimm as early as 1757 :

C'est en 1757 que Melchior Grimm conçut l'idée d'utiliser le talent littéraire de son ami Diderot pour présenter les Salons de peinture aux lecteurs de la *Correspondance Littéraire*. Cette année-là, les feux de la critique s'étaient concentrés sur le *Sacrifice d'Iphigénie* de Carle Van Loo et Grimm avait imaginé une conversation entre Diderot et lui au cours de laquelle étaient examinés tour à tour les défauts et les qualités de l'œuvre exposée (Chouillet 1984 in Musée de Breuil de Saint-Germain, Langres 1984 : 13).

Grimm's imagination of a conversation between himself and Diderot as a means of critiquing *Le Sacrifice d'Iphigénie* strongly suggests that the two men had already attended the exhibition together. As Belleguic observes, "Grimm couvrit les Salons de 1753, 1755 et 1757 pour la *Correspondance Littéraire*. Il est possible que Diderot ait pu, très tôt, l'y accompagner" (Belleguic 2007 : 4). Grimm's decision to attend the *Salon* with Diderot also indicates that at the time of writing his critique of *Le Sacrifice d'Iphigénie*, a link already existed, in Grimm's mind, between Diderot and the writing of art criticism for the *Correspondance Littéraire*. However the idea of Diderot's *Salons* came about, the writing of them was indeed a collaborative effort in which the talents of both men were utilised to maximum effectiveness. According to Starobinski :

L'occasion s'offrait à Diderot de parler comme il aimait parler : à une personne déterminée, dans un moment déterminé, devant une série d'objets déterminés, mais en pensant à des destinataires éloignés dans l'espace et dans le temps (1991 in Seznec 2007 : 219).

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<sup>18</sup> Two separate editions of Diderot's correspondence have been used in this dissertation, as the edition of Diderot's *Oeuvres complètes* that is employed in the dissertation (Assézat 1876), does not contain the philosopher's complete correspondence.

The Salon form afforded Diderot the freedom to talk as much as he chose, about a precise series of paintings, to an audience that could ask no questions and pose no interruptions, all under the comforting and liberating guise of conversing with an old friend. Writing the *Salon* like a letter to a friend also allowed the reader to entertain “l’illusion d’une consommation libre et désintéressée des toiles” (Frantz and Lavezzi 2008 : 92). It was this arrangement that was to give the Salons their endearing and conversational tone, which pleased Diderot to such an extent that he was to maintain the epistolary form in all future *Salons*. The degree of comfort and informality afforded him by this type of literature was not the only reason he was to conserve it in his future work. The epistolary form was a popular one in eighteenth-century France, not only because the highest social circles favoured the exchange of knowledge through conversation rather than through sermonising, but because interaction through letters was considered to be the sincerest and most honest form of communication (Cammagré 2007 in ed. Cammagré and Talon-Hugon 2007 : 27). Structuring the *Salons* as letters to Grimm, each one commencing with the phrase “À Mon Ami Monsieur Grimm”, also facilitated Grimm’s role as editor of the *Correspondance Littéraire* ; enabling him to temper Diderot’s enthusiasm in his ruthless denunciations of what he considered to be the mangling of great literature by bad history painters. One must not imagine for a moment, however, that the “facilitation” afforded Grimm by the epistolary form rendered the editing of Diderot’s work particularly facile. The manuscript of the *Salon de 1759* shows no paragraphs, no underlined words, no margins and a cramped script that Grimm found illegible (Lojkin 2007 : 63).

Diderot’s handwriting would prove to be an ongoing problem in which the philosopher steadfastly refused to admit any wrongdoing :

Mes brouillons sont indéchiffrables. Celui qui en fait des copies pour Grimm m’aura l’obligation de la perte de ses yeux. Cependant je verrai ([23 August 1769] ; Roth IX : 118).

There were many other difficulties and victories, of various kinds, for both men over the course of their collaboration. In the *Salon de 1761*, for instance, Grimm at last managed to convince Diderot to include a wide margin in which to note the names and dimensions of the paintings he was writing about, though paragraphs and underlined words remained elusive (Lojkin 2007: 64). In 1766, however, there was little sense of victory for Grimm, as the *Salon de 1765* more closely resembled a novel than a short piece of art criticism. Grimm complained about this in a letter to Caroline of Hesse-Darmstadt :

Mon ami Diderot, au lieu de feuilles, m'a fait un livre sur le *Salon*. Je n'ai pas le courage d'en rien retrancher : mais il faut rédiger ses feuilles à mesure qu'il me les donne, il faut les copier moi-même pour les mettre en état d'être recopiées ; et cela demande beaucoup de temps ([15 July 1766] ; Schlobach 1972 : 56).

Grimm proved to be a vital partner in the writing of the *Salons* (Cammagre 2007 in ed. Cammagre and Talon-Hugon 2007 : 26), which is clear from Diderot's incessant complaining about him. He was a strict and hands-on editor ; indeed, Diderot, in a state of feigned calm, wrote in the *Salon de 1761* that "vous me tyrannisez, mon poulet" (ed. Chouillet and May 1984: 148). Grimm did not spend all his time being tyrannical, however, and encouraged Diderot both in his interactions with artists and Salon-goers and in his steady acquisition of artistic knowledge (Starobinski 1991 in Seznec 2007 : 219).

To a certain extent, Diderot was untroubled by his initial lack of knowledge of art and how this might affect his art criticism in the *Correspondance Littéraire*. To begin with, Diderot was *un homme de lettres*, and was accustomed to dealing with the world of the imagination and passions :

[L'art] comporte un élément idéal, ou moral – "le sujet, les passions, les caractères" – dont le littérateur est aussi bon juge, et souvent meilleur, que l'artiste lui-même, car le jugement, dans ce domaine appartient à tous les hommes de goût (Seznec 2007 : 11).

Diderot believed himself to possess the capability, present in all *hommes de goût*, to judge a work of art in terms of its moral or emotional aspects. These aspects of art, called "idéal" by the philosopher, are defined by the great Diderot scholar Bukdahl as "contenu [de la peinture], imagination, connaissance de littérature" (1980 : 328). As *un homme de lettres* and *un homme de goût*, Diderot was capable of judging all three, and when he began to write art criticism for Grimm, the philosopher was certainly content with that. It was not long, however, before Diderot realised that the criticism of art required the knowledge of more than human emotions : if these emotions were poorly portrayed, then their intensity would be impaired, as would the work of art that they belonged to. If Diderot was to be an effective art critic, he would need to acquire some knowledge of what he called "technique", an aspect of Diderot's aesthetic thought defined by Bukdahl as "forme, maîtrise des procédés artistiques" (1980 : 328).

Once Diderot had realised the importance of artistic *savoir* to the effective practice of art criticism, the philosopher underwent his artistic education with great dedication, both from a theoretical and from a more practical perspective. According to Seznec :

[Diderot] s'est instruit par la lecture de Vinci, de Jean Cousin, de Roger de Piles, de Fréart de Chambray, de Le Brun. Il faisait, en même temps, son éducation visuelle : il visitait les galeries royales et privées, le Luxembourg, le Palais-Royal, les cabinets d'amateurs, Gaignat, Watelet, Choiseul (2007 : 9).

Seznec observes that Diderot's education in artistic theory largely comprised the reading of significant artistic treatises such as da Vinci and de Piles, and the visiting of prominent art galleries, both private and public. However, what we may call his more "practical" education, that is, his associations with well-known artists, was far more effective in teaching the philosopher the rules of art. In Diderot's aesthetic treatise *Pensées détachées sur la peinture*, Diderot remarks on how to improve one's knowledge of artistic technique by associating with artists. These remarks are significant in that they were made long after Diderot had written his most significant *Salons* of 1759 through to 1767<sup>19</sup>. They were therefore written when the philosopher had the benefit of hindsight as to the best way to advance one's artistic education:

Voulez-vous faire des progrès sûrs dans la connaissance si difficile du technique de l'art ? Promenez-vous dans une galerie avec un artiste, et faites-vous expliquer et montrer sur la toile l'exemple des mots techniques ; sans cela, vous n'aurez jamais que des notions confuses (...) Il faut voir et revoir la qualité à côté du défaut ; un coup d'œil supplée à cent pages de discours. Les traités élémentaires de peinture, au rebours des traités élémentaires des autres sciences, ne sont intelligibles que pour les maitres (Assézat XII : 113).

Diderot's method of learning both the rules of art and the contribution of those rules to the realisation of the final result is to attend the Salon accompanied by an artist. This artist will then make use of the paintings to demonstrate the meanings of certain "mots techniques", and to juxtapose the effective and ineffective employment of the concepts demonstrated by such words.

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<sup>19</sup> Although Diderot continues to write critiques of the Salons until 1781, the committedness of his critique declines considerably from 1769 onwards (Bukdahl 1984 in Angrémy *et al.* 1984 : 57).

Diderot recommends this method for learning about technique because it is a form of “apprenticeship” that he underwent himself in the course of writing the *Salons*, and that the philosopher had previously experienced on a large scale when writing the *Encyclopédie*. According to Seznec :

Voilà Diderot l'apprenti, le même Diderot qui court les fabriques pour faire dessiner les planches de l'*Encyclopédie* et qui s'instruit auprès des artisans eux-mêmes de leurs outils et de leurs procédés. Son apprentissage du “métier” de l'art, il l'a fait sous les meilleurs maîtres. Qui le guide au Salon ? C'est Chardin, “tapissier” des expositions, c'est-à-dire chargé de l'accrochage des toiles (...) Diderot a vu peindre La Tour ; il a questionné Pigalle ; il a fréquenté Boucher, Cochin, Le Moyne, Vernet, Lagrenée. À ses amis les artistes, il a emprunté non seulement un vocabulaire, mais selon son expression “leurs yeux mêmes”. Il a reçu “les lumières de ces gens de l'art, parmi lesquels il y en a beaucoup qui le chérissent, et qui lui disent la vérité”. Il a bien profité de leurs leçons – au point de les retourner, plus tard, contre ses maîtres. “S'il m'arrive de blesser l'artiste, écrit-il en 1765, c'est souvent avec l'arme qu'il a lui-même aiguisée” (Seznec 2007 : 12).

When writing the *Encyclopédie*, much of Diderot's acquisition of knowledge, particularly artisanal knowledge, took place in the studios and workshops of the artisans themselves, because Diderot believed that it was only through the gaining of first-hand information about every tool and procedure that he would be able to provide an accurate description of a particular genre of craft or workmanship in the *Encyclopédie*. When writing the *Salons*, Diderot's approach was exactly the same. He studied the methods employed by artists to bring about their creations under some of the greatest artists and sculptors of the Age of Enlightenment, like those mentioned by Seznec above. Diderot did not merely acquire an artistic vocabulary from these artists, but “leurs yeux mêmes”. He learned how to view art with an artist's eyes, sometimes to the point of wounding certain artists “avec l'arme qu'il a lui-meme aiguisée”. Of course, this impressive knowledge of art was not acquired overnight. It took years, as is testified by the vast differences in length between the *Salon de 1759* (a few pages) and the *Salon de 1767* (two book-length volumes). The growing length of the *Salons* represents Diderot's growing technical knowledge, and how his perception of art evolved from a simple, emotional instinct for a painting's ideal into something far more complex : the understanding that technical brilliance had a role to play in the production of great art that was of equal importance to a painter's ability to elicit emotion.

## 1.4 The dialectic between technique and ideal

In this discussion of Diderot's gradual understanding of art, and of how it came about, we have shown that while writing the *Salons*, Diderot came to the realisation that art criticism, and indeed the practice of successful art, hinged on two important factors : ideal and technique. Ideal, or the knowledge of imagination and emotion, was something that Diderot had instinctively possessed from the beginning of his foray into art criticism. As *un homme de lettres*, he understood poetics, and how human emotions might best be portrayed. Furthermore, as *un homme de goût*, he believed himself to be sufficiently cultivated to judge whether morality, or passion, had been tastefully portrayed in a particular work. Knowledge of technique, however, could not be provided by Diderot's literary and philosophical background. The philosopher remedied this by reading important aesthetic treatises and by learning from artists of his acquaintance in much the same way that he had learned about many artisanal careers in the course of his work on the *Encyclopédie* : through hands-on observation over a period of years. The philosopher thus learned to evaluate art in terms of its technical excellence, in terms of its ability to stir the emotions and in terms of the relationship between these two concepts demonstrated in a particular work of art.

This dialectic between technique and ideal was to become Diderot's most important method of criticising a work of art, and it is through his constantly-developing understanding of this dynamic that Diderot “fait indiscutablement du couple technique-idéal le concept opératoire fondamental pour penser une poétique de la peinture” (Lojkine 2009)<sup>20</sup>. In so doing, Diderot became the first writer to express a detailed methodology for a criticism and appreciation of art that could both enlighten and entertain the reader, and make art criticism the discipline that it is today. It is the development of Diderot's perception of the relationship between technique and ideal that will be investigated in this dissertation.

We propose to establish how Diderot's insight into the relationship between technique and ideal changes from the *Salon de 1759* to the *Salon de 1767*<sup>21</sup>. In the early *Salons*, Diderot possessed little artistic competence, and viewed technique and ideal as two entirely separate, and indeed warring, entities. By the end of the *Salon de 1767*, however, his knowledge of the rules of art was at its zenith, and he had come to perceive technique and ideal as two parties

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<sup>20</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>21</sup> The dissertation will not deal with the literary aspects of Diderot's *Salons*, but only with the philosopher's treatment of the concepts of technique and ideal.



in a symbiotic relationship in which a mastery of artistic technique was a fundamental condition of the mastery of ideal. This insight into the interrelatedness of the two concepts enabled Diderot to understand that great art could only be created by an artist with an understanding of the importance of technique to the fostering of ideal and vice versa. It was this comprehension of the interrelatedness of technique and ideal that became Diderot's principal method for art criticism, for without an understanding of this interrelatedness, the critic could not be depended on to express accurate opinions.

We will attempt to demonstrate this development of Diderot's perception of the relationship between technique and ideal through a textual analysis of the content of those *Salons* written between 1759 and 1767. This textual analysis will take place within the theoretical framework demonstrated by Bourdieu in his sociological theory of art perception<sup>22</sup>, whereby an individual's artistic competence, that is, their ability to truly appreciate a work of art, depends very much on the profundity of their understanding of the work's subject matter.

### **1.5 Structure of the dissertation**

This theoretical framework for textual analysis provided by Bourdieu's theory, together with its appropriateness to the study of Diderot's *Salons*, will be presented in the first section of the next chapter, Chapter 2. The first part of Chapter 2 will also introduce and motivate our use of Barthes' exploration of the relationship between text and reader in *The Pleasure of the Text*, which we will employ as a supplementary theory to aid textual analysis. The second part of Chapter 2 will be a review of the literature that has already appeared on the development of Diderot's treatment and perception of the interdependence of technique and ideal in the *Salons*. The purpose of this second section is to achieve an appreciation of the major issues inherent in the relationship between technique and ideal that have already been identified by critics, before undertaking our own investigation in the chapters that follows.

Chapter 3 will comprise three parts, each devoted to the *Salons* of 1759, 1761 and 1763 respectively. In this chapter, we will attempt to establish whether the notion of the interrelatedness of the concepts of technique and ideal occurs to Diderot at this early stage of his art criticism and, if so, whether he acknowledges this interrelatedness. To achieve this, Chapter 3 will comprise analyses of critiques of paintings from all three of these early *Salons* that best embody Diderot's treatment of artists' ability to capture the imagination and the methods they employ to do so. These paintings are : Jeaurat's *Chartreux en méditation*,

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 2.

Bachelier's *Résurrection*, La Grenée's *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils*, Carle<sup>23</sup> Van Loo's *Jason et Médée*, Greuze's *L'Accordée du Village* and Carle Van Loo's *Les Grâces enchaînées par l'amour*.

In Chapter 4, we will observe Diderot's construction of a "couple" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>24</sup> from the two separate notions of technique and ideal and how he comes to see that these concepts do not exist apart, as he had previously believed, but are interdependent in the artist's creation of great art and the critic's interpretation of it. We will discuss Diderot's treatment of the relationship between technique and ideal through the examination of his analyses of three paintings exhibited at the *Salon de 1765* : Bachelier's *Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile* and *La Charité Romaine*, and Fragonard's *Le Grand Prêtre Corésus s'immole pour sauver Callirhoé*. In Diderot's view, these paintings are imperfect, whether with respect to technique, or to ideal, or to both and Diderot's discussions of them provide us with texts rich in matter with which to study the development and construct of what Lojkin calls "[le] couple technique-idéal" (2009)<sup>25</sup>.

The aim of Chapter 5 is to establish whether Diderot, having concluded in 1765 that technique and ideal are a "couple" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>26</sup>, continues to advocate their interdependence in the *Salon de 1767* and if so, how he uses this belief as a methodology of art criticism. We will attempt to establish this in three different steps. First, we will examine Diderot's comments on the effectiveness of Vien's combination of technique and ideal in his *Saint Denis prêchant la foi en France* and whether these comments suggest that Diderot is a proponent of the necessity of a symbiotic relationship in great art. Second, we will apply the same question to Doyen's *Miracle des ardents*. Third, we will examine the passages in which Diderot compares Vien and Doyen, in order to determine how Diderot's conviction that a symbiotic relationship exists between technique and ideal manifests itself as a methodology of art criticism.

Chapter 6, the conclusion, will present final findings on whether Diderot's perception of the interdependence of the technique and ideal develops between the writing of the *Salon de 1759* and the *Salon de 1767*. From the conclusions drawn in the previous chapters about the

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<sup>23</sup> First name provided to distinguish this artist from Louis-Michel Van Loo, Jean-Baptiste Van Loo and Amédée Van Loo.

<sup>24</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>25</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>26</sup> No page number provided in web document.

progress of Diderot's artistic competence (or lack thereof), we will deduce whether Diderot's views on technique and ideal as conflicting aspects of a work of art have undergone significant change. Recommendations will also be made in terms of how Diderot's understanding of the "couple technique-idéal" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>27</sup> may be employed in the study of other aesthetic texts written by Diderot.

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<sup>27</sup> No page number provided in web document.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

Diderot's aesthetic is a vast field of study, encompassing his *Salons*, his aesthetic treatises such as *Essai sur la peinture* and the entries on art that he wrote for the *Encyclopédie*. There are many important works on Diderot's general aesthetic, including Chouillet 1973 ; May 1973 ; Crocker 1974 ; Bukdahl 1980 ; Fried 1970 ; Le Pichon 1993 ; Vogel 1993 ; Arnold 1995 ; Modica 1997 and Déan 2000. In the domain of Diderot's general aesthetic, studies have also been conducted regarding Diderot's influence on certain aesthetic thinkers, or their influence on him. These thinkers include Burke (May 1960), Hegel (Gearhart 1986), Hogarth (Endres 2004) and Kant (Braider 2013). As to the *Salons* themselves, there are many important questions that critics have sought to address. Such questions include the difficulties of interpreting art through the medium of writing (Proust 1967 ; Cartwright 1969 ; Vouilloux 1988; Cohen 1991 ; Lojkine 2007 ; Gaillard 2007 ; Lavezzi 2007) and Diderot's views on the didactic function of art (Bukdahl 2003 ; Worvill 2010). There are also many important studies focussing on certain themes within the *Salons*, such as the Sublime (Delon 1986), cruelty (René 1984), the value of the *Salons* as works of literature (Starobinski 1991), the role of music (Rebejkow 1997), the role of allegory (Tonneau 2003) and Diderot's treatment of colour (Hobson 2007).

In terms of Diderot's status as the father of modern art criticism, the vast quantity of scholarship on his aesthetic is unsurprising. However, if one is to examine the bare framework of Diderot's development as an art critic, and focus not on Diderot's status but on the reasons why he holds this status, namely the manner in which he develops the interaction of technique with ideal, the quantity of scholarship becomes sparser.

Scholarship tends to examine technique or ideal as separate concepts rather than attempting to understand the relationship between them (Cartwright 1969 ; Delon 2011, 2012), and the nature of the interaction between technique and ideal is rarely discussed in detail outside studies in which this question forms part of a larger analysis of Diderot's *Salons* or of his aesthetic (Proust 1960; Chouillet 1973 ; Bukdahl 1980 ; Fried 1980 ; Déan 1997 ; Lojkine 2007 ; Hobson 2007 ; Clark 2012). There is only one study (Lojkine 2009) in which the relationship between technique and ideal is the sole and primary subject, and this study is an

article. The premise on which our study rests is that the question of technique, ideal and their potential interdependence is of significant importance, deserving far more scholarship than it has elicited to date. As stated above, the relationship between technique and ideal forms the basis of Diderot's methodology of art criticism. Therefore, in view of Diderot's importance as the first "modern" art critic, the study of this methodology and how it came about is not merely a question of Diderot's contribution to the development of art criticism, but also of the development of modern art criticism as a discipline.

Let us consider Diderot's knowledge of art at the time that he wrote the *Salon de 1759*, his first. His knowledge of technique, if it may be said to have existed at all, is so scant that the significance of technique in the creation of great art is hardly mentioned. Diderot prefers to focus on the grand emotions that painting elicits in him. In the *Salon de 1761*, his second, Diderot continues to focus almost exclusively on the value of ideal, and clearly describes technique as something to be sneered at : "je me moque de ces conditions" (Assézat X : 151). And yet by end of the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot has stated that "la peinture se divise en technique et idéale, et l'une et l'autre se sous-divisent en peinture en portrait, peinture de genre et peinture historique" (Assézat X : 423) ; thus placing the relationship between technique and ideal on the same level of importance as the hierarchy of genres<sup>28</sup>. By the end of the *Salon de 1767*, Diderot has made the relationship between technique and ideal what Lojkin calls "l'opposition de base pour penser et pour évaluer le processus de la création artistique" (2009)<sup>29</sup>.

It is, in our view, important to establish how and why this dramatic change of heart, so central to Diderot's own aesthetic development and to the creation of modern art criticism, occurred. Our position is that the question deserves to be dealt with in a single study that does not treat the symbiotic rapport between technique and ideal as a part of a wider study of Diderot's aesthetic or of his *Salons*, but that makes the question its primary investigation.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse significant scholarship on the development of the relationship between technique and ideal in Diderot's *Salons*, from 1759 to 1767, and to identify areas where scholarship on this topic is scarser. The chapter will be divided into two parts. In the first part, a methodology for the textual analysis of Diderot's *Salons* will be proposed. A theory will also be put forward as a means of scrutinising Diderot's reaction to

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<sup>28</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>29</sup> No page number provided in web document.

certain paintings. The second part of the literature review will in itself be divided into two subsections. The first will deal with those instances in which the question of the interdependence of technique and ideal appears within studies that deal generally, or with a particular aspect, of Diderot's aesthetic or of the *Salons*. The second subsection will investigate Lojkin's 2009 article on technique and ideal, which is the only available source which makes the relationship between these two concepts its sole focus.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework and theory**

### **2.2.1 Bourdieu**

The theoretical framework that will be employed for textual analysis in our dissertation is Bourdieu's sociological theory of art perception outlined in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1984).

Bourdieu refers to the analysis of art as a "deciphering operation" (1984 : 1) which can be only be carried out if the individual engaged in such an operation has mastered the "cultural code" or "artistic competence" that characterises the work itself :

An act of deciphering *unrecognized as such*, immediate and adequate "comprehension", is possible and effective only in the special case in which the cultural code which makes the act of deciphering possible is immediately and completely mastered by the observer (in the form of the cultivated ability or inclination) and merges with the cultural code which has rendered the work perceived possible (Bourdieu 1984 : 1).

Bourdieu claims that if an individual is to properly engage with a work of art, that is, if he is to contemplate it and immediately and objectively understand it, independent of the artist's intention, then the viewer's culture, that is, his "artistic competence" (Bourdieu 1984 : 2) must be equal to that of the artist. Without this artistic competence, the viewer is bound to interpret the work of art incorrectly, as this interpretation will take place through the use of an invalid code. If a viewer fails to understand that all works of art are constructed according to a cultural code, then he will apply a code employed by him for the routine perception of his world and culture to a work of art that has been conceived using a foreign code :

There is no perception which does not involve an unconscious code and it is essential to dismiss the myth of the "fresh eye", considered a virtue attributed to naiveté and innocence (Bourdieu 1984 : 3).

In this extract, Bourdieu claims that all beholders engage with art based on a cultural code of some kind, whether conscious or unconscious, sophisticated or unsophisticated. He also insists on the non-existence of the “fresh eye” in the contemplation of art. No viewer is uninfluenced by a cultural code when contemplating a work of art : the very notion, according to Bourdieu, is a “myth”.

Bourdieu continues his discussion on the significance of cultural codes by reiterating their importance and predominance in the deciphering process : “any deciphering operation requires a more or less complex code which has been more or less completely mastered” (Bourdieu 1984 : 4). He then elaborates on the nature of cultural codes by identifying different levels of signification that exist within all works of art and that may be accessed by the viewer depending on his or her level of artistic competence. Bourdieu cites Panofsky in claiming that a viewer with a mastery of only the lowest form of cultural code does not possess the capability to interact with a work of art beyond a very basic level, that is, beyond a work’s demonstrative qualities or emotional effect on the viewer. This rudimentary aesthetic experience is equated with an understanding of a work’s “primary or natural subject matter” (1955 : 17 in Bourdieu 1984 : 4). In order to attain an understanding of a work of art on a deeper level than its “primary or natural subject matter”, the viewer must possess knowledge of certain “themes or concepts” attained through a study of the relevant literature. The viewer must also be knowledgeable of artistic technique, that is, of the “stylistic characteristics” of a particular work in order to interpret such a work in a way that may be called complete. The acquisition of this kind of knowledge facilitates the viewer’s understanding of art on a deeper level, and it is with this sort of knowledge that the viewer is able to access what is called a work of art’s “secondary subject matter” :

The most naive beholder first of all distinguishes “the primary or natural subject matter or meaning which we can apprehend from our practical experience”, or, in other words, “the phenomenal meaning which can be subdivided into factual and expressional”. This apprehension depends on “demonstrative concepts” which only identify and grasp the sensible qualities of the work (this is the case when a peach is described as velvety or lace as misty) or the emotional experience that these qualities arouse in the beholder (when colours are spoken of as harsh or gay). To reach “the secondary subject matter which presupposes a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources” and which may be called the “sphere of the meaning of the signified” (*région du sens du signifié*), we must have “appropriately characterizing concepts” which go beyond the

simple designation of sensible qualities and, grasping the stylistic characteristics of the work of art, constitute a genuine “interpretation” of it (Bourdieu 1984 : 4-5).

However, the secondary subject matter of a work of art is more complex than the simple understanding of certain concepts and techniques. There are two principal parts to secondary subject matter that must be understood if a viewer is to gain understanding of such subject matter. The first part of secondary subject matter is the “secondary or conventional meaning” of a work of art ; a meaning which may be interpreted through an understanding of iconography. Bourdieu defines iconography with the example of how a work of art representing a company at table under certain conditions may be said to depict the Last Supper. The second and more important part of secondary subject matter requires more complex interpretation than simple iconography, as it is not knowledge of the significance of a single image, but knowledge of an entire culture that is required in order to achieve an understanding of a work’s entire secondary subject matter :

Within this secondary stratum, Panofsky distinguishes, on the one hand, “the secondary or conventional meaning, the world of specific themes or concepts manifested in images, stories and allegories” (when, for instance, a group of persons seated around a table according to a certain arrangement represents the Last Supper), the deciphering of which falls to iconography ; and, on the other hand, “the intrinsic meaning or content” which the iconological interpretation can recapture only if the iconographical meanings and methods of composition are treated as “cultural symbols” [1955 : 26-54], as expressions of the culture of an age, a nation or a class, and if an effort is made to bring out the fundamental principles which support the choice and presentation of the motifs as well as the production and interpretation of the images, stories and allegories and which give a meaning even to the formal composition and to the technical processes (Bourdieu 1984 : 5).

True understanding of a work of art is only possible when the viewer understands the work’s “intrinsic meaning or content” This intrinsic meaning can only exist if the “iconographical meanings and methods of composition” are seen not as independent elements that exist of and for themselves, but as part of a particular culture. The viewer’s knowledge of such a culture must be extensive enough for him to be capable of applying its tenets to the ideas and principles embodied in a work of art. The viewer must do this on a level so profound that his cultural knowledge “[gives] meaning even to the formal composition and to the technical processes” (Bourdieu 1984 : 5). When the work of art has been interpreted under these



conditions, its formal qualities will reveal its expressive qualities ; thus creating a true aesthetic experience.

Having defined the fundamental differences between the aesthetic experiences of the primary and second subject matter of a work of art, Bourdieu elaborates on the disadvantages of interpreting art based on primary subject matter only. Bourdieu calls such interpretation “mutilated” (1984 : 5). His striking choice of words is evocative of the degree to which Bourdieu rebuffs such interpretations as being not merely inconvenient to the aesthetic experience, but harmful to it.

Bourdieu blames the predominance of the exclusive interpretation of art through primary subject matter on the Romantic movement’s emphasis on emotional responses to a work of art’s expressive qualities. As has already been discussed above, Bourdieu views such interpretation as simplistic because it is “not (...) supported, controlled or corrected by knowledge of (...) style, types and cultural symptoms” (1984 : 6) :

Uninitiated perception, reduced to the grasping of primary significations, is a mutilated perception. Contrasted with what might be called – to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche – “the dogma of the immaculate perception”, foundation of the Romantic representation of artistic experience, the “comprehension” of the “expressive”, and one might say, “physiognomical” qualities of the work is only an inferior and mutilated form of the aesthetic experience, because, not being supported, controlled or corrected by knowledge of the style, types and cultural symptoms, it uses a code which is neither adequate nor specific (Bourdieu 1984 : 5-6).

Bourdieu reaffirms his conviction that responding to a work of art with pure emotion is to respond to it without the use of a specific or adequate cultural code, thus creating an aesthetic experience that is incomplete and mutilated. Bourdieu supports this view with biological evidence, cited from Ruyer (1952)<sup>30</sup> :

(...) Raymond Ruyer very discerningly contrasts the significance, which he defines as “epicritic”, and the *expressivity* which he describes as “protopathic”, that is to say more primitive, more blurred of the lower level, linked with the diencephalon, whereas the signification is linked with the cerebral cortex (Bourdieu 1984: 6).

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<sup>30</sup> No page number provided in Bourdieu (1984).

To appreciate the “expressivity” of a work of art is to do so using a cultural code that is “protopathic” and utilises the “blurred” and “primitive” part of the human brain, the diencephalon. The “significance” of a work of art, however, can only be appreciated through use of the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain responsible for memory, reasoning, consciousness and language. Thus, in order to access the more significant “second subject matter” of a work, one must make use of a more significant and reasoning part of one’s brain.

In the context of the two aesthetic experiences described above, that is, the comprehension of a work’s primary and secondary subject matter, Bourdieu distinguishes “two extremes and opposite forms of aesthetic pleasure” :

(...) The *enjoyment* which accompanies aesthetic perception reduced to simple *aesthesis*, and the *delight* procured by scholarly savouring, presupposing, as a necessary but insufficient condition, adequate deciphering” (1984 : 6).

“Enjoyment” of art, or “aesthesis”, is what results from confining one’s aesthetic appreciation to an understanding of a work’s expressivity. Such experience is purely emotional. “Delight” of art can only be achieved by “scholarly savouring” and “deciphering”, both of which are required in order to achieve appreciation of a work of art’s secondary subject matter. The recognition of this division between aesthesis and delight leads Bourdieu to provide a conclusive definition of what he considers true competence in art to be :

The degree of an agent’s art competence is measured by the degree to which he or she masters the set of instruments for the appropriation of the work of art (1984 : 8).

A true appreciation of art that goes beyond aesthesis and is characterised by delight is only possible when an individual has mastered “the set of instruments for the appropriation of the work of art” : in other words, when the individual has acquired in-depth knowledge of artistic technique.

Bourdieu’s sociological theory of art perception is an appropriate methodology to employ for the textual analysis in this dissertation because its conditions for the optimal appreciation of art correspond almost perfectly with the development of Diderot’s own artistic education, and the role played by that education in improving his understanding of the relationship between technique and ideal. For example, in the first *Salon* (1759), Diderot had little knowledge of technique, and tended to focus, sometimes exclusively, on a work’s expressive qualities, or

its “ideal”. Thus, Diderot’s aesthetic experience was characterised by aesthesis, and an appreciation of a work’s primary subject matter. Because he had such little knowledge of artistic technique, the secondary subject matter of the works critiqued was largely closed to him<sup>31</sup>. This aesthesis continued in all the early *Salons* (1759, 1761, 1763) and Diderot often favoured works with poor technique and superior ideal because he was not yet able to appreciate the role of technique in the totality of a work of art. However, in the later *Salons* (1765, 1767), Diderot’s knowledge of artistic technique improved. By that time, he had studied aesthetic treatises and had accompanied artists to the *Salons* in order to learn from them. In learning the purpose of artistic technique in the creation of great art, Diderot was able to appreciate that if an artist’s aim was to bring the viewer into a complete aesthetic experience, superior ideal was rarely possible through poor technique. He was thus able to access a work’s secondary subject matter, and to experience the “delight” that came from the appreciation of such subject matter. Thus, from the *Salon de 1759* to the *Salon de 1767*, Diderot progressed from “aesthesis” to “delight”, and it is his progression from one to the other that we aim to investigate in this dissertation.

### 2.2.2 Barthes

In addition to employing Bourdieu’s sociological theory of art perception as a theoretical framework for the textual analysis of Diderot’s *Salons*, we further propose to employ a theory, posited by Barthes, in order to explain and scrutinise Diderot’s reactions to certain paintings. In this theory, outlined in Barthes’ work *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Barthes makes use of the French language’s powerful capacity for erotic expression to explore the relationship between text and reader. The most fascinating distinction made in this work is between what Barthes calls texts of pleasure (*plaisir*) and texts of bliss (*jouissance*) :

Text of pleasure : the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria ; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.

Text of bliss : the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

Now the subject who keeps the two texts in his field and in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject, for

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<sup>31</sup> We may safely assume that Diderot was versed in the cultural iconography of the time, but his lack of knowledge of technique at the time of the early *Salons* would have severely impeded his understanding of a work’s secondary subject matter.

he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture (which permeates him quickly under cover of an *art de vivre* shared by the old books) and in the destruction of that culture : he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse (Barthes 1975 : 14).

When reading a text of pleasure, the reader finds himself in a perpetual state of comfort that lies somewhere between contentment and euphoria. He does not see his position as a reader challenged or discomfited in any way. A text of bliss, however, engages the reader in an altogether different way by constantly challenging and unsettling everything “historical, cultural [and] psychological” that the reader is accustomed to taking for granted. A text of bliss causes the reader to challenge his relationship with language, the importance of which he may never have considered before. It is through reading texts of bliss rather than texts of pleasure that Barthes’ hypothetical reader comes to experience an intense, orgasmic rapture linked to the destruction of his comfort zone as a reader. The writer of the text has transported the reader from what is usual and secure for him, and engaged with him on an entirely new level ; a level that has brought him to an infinitely more heightened pleasure than the traditional reading experience of *plaisir*. For Barthes, however, it is the reader who prefers to engage both with texts of pleasure and with texts of bliss that is the most complex, because he is “a subject split twice over, doubly perverse”. He passionately loves culture, but delights in questioning it ; he revels in his own individuality and finds excitement in the questioning of its *raison d’être*.

It is a complex question whether Diderot’s readers, a select group of foreign crown heads too far removed from Paris to attend Parisian art exhibitions, found the *Salons* to be texts of pleasure or texts of bliss. The answer depends very much on the reader’s degree of artistic competence and openness and liberality to the ideas expressed by Diderot in the *Salons*. To certain readers, Diderot’s *Salons* may very well have been texts of pleasure in that they “[come from culture] and [do] not break with it, [are] linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading”. In many parts of the *Salons*, Diderot advocates traditional views of the culture of French painting, such as the hierarchy of genres, the idea of antiquity as the ideal model for all art, and the dominance of the *Académie Royale*. The *Salons* may therefore be said to be texts of pleasure in those areas where the characteristics of texts of pleasure are adhered to.

For many more readers of the *Salons*, however, it is much more likely that Diderot's *Salons* were texts of bliss, and evoked the kind of euphoric emotion described by both Barthes and by Bourdieu. This is because the *Salons* may be said to have challenged, and/or destroyed the reader's view of what constituted great art far more than they endorsed the preservation of cultural tradition. This may be seen through Diderot's advocacy and love of genre painters such as Greuze and Chardin, and his persistent belief that these painters deserved equal recognition to history painters. The *Salons*' challenging of conventional culture may also be observed in Diderot's very vocal dislike of fashionable painters with powerful patrons, most famously Boucher. The likelihood that Diderot considered the *Salons* to be texts of bliss is also evident in the freedom with which the philosopher expresses his opinions, as the manuscript form and exclusive audience of the *Correspondance Littéraire* meant that the *Salons* escaped the censor, and the stifling correctness of opinion that he imposed. The *Salons* possess many of the characteristics of texts of bliss, indeed they may be said to fall more cleanly into the category of bliss than into that of pleasure.

Finally, and this is how this dissertation will characterise the *Salons* in Barthesian terms, it is highly probable that the readers of Diderot's *Salons* fell into that category of the perverse Barthesian reader who loves texts of pleasure *and* texts of bliss. He loves culture, but feels a morbid fascination with the idea of cultural norms coming to an end. He may love art, but he may also love the way in which Diderot destroys it, from his flippant cries of "Au Pont Notre Dame" when a work is considered too awful even to subject to criticism, to his virtual reality deconstructions and reconstructions of masterpieces that he seeks to transport to a higher level of perfection.

In the paragraph above, we discussed whether the readers of the *Salons* viewed these texts as being texts of pleasure, of bliss, or of both. If we apply this idea, not to the readers of the *Salons*, but to their writer, we begin to perceive that in writing art criticism, Diderot is charged with conveying his "bliss" at seeing a painting to the reader through text, thus enabling us to interpret Diderot's *Salons* as "texts of bliss". However, it is also evident from the philosopher's contradictory passion for the creation of art and the destruction of it that Diderot's *Salons*, from his point of view, may also constitute texts that are simultaneously of pleasure *and* of bliss. According to Starobinski :

Tous les prétextes étaient réunis, et d'abord le défi que les arts "muets" lancent à la parole, et l'occasion de riposte en querellant les peintres, les sculpteurs, sur leur façon de traduire en images les poètes, les dramaturges, et les historiens...

Grimm invitait Diderot à se porter sur la ligne de partage où deux modes de communication – l'image, le langage articulé – se mettent réciproquement à l'épreuve. Situation animatrice pour la pensée de Diderot. Tant de choses dans la peinture paraissent indicibles, indescriptibles. Tant d'accents et de rythmes, dans la poésie, paraissent irréprésentables. Et pourtant le désir d'expression, l'exigence de manifestation veulent passer outre, établir un échange heureux entre dire et figurer. Ce sont tour à tour la légitimité de l'image et celle de la parole qui se trouvent mises en question. Et pour mener ce débat, tel que l'avait engagé plus abstraitement la *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, il faut que le critique d'art philosophe déploie un langage multiforme, chaleureux, assez mobile pour opérer sur divers fronts, par voltes rapides. Rendre compte d'un Salon, pour Diderot, c'est avoir à se ramifier, c'est devenir un être pluriel, parlant plusieurs langages : c'est se soumettre au principe de variabilité qu'il mettra en scène, dans *Le Neveu de Rameau*, sous les auspices de Vertumne (Starobinski 1991 : 219-220).

Starobinski states that one of Diderot's primary motivations in writing the *Salons* was his taste for the challenge presented by *ekphrasis* ; that is, the description of visual art through words. In writing art criticism for the *Correspondance Littéraire*, Diderot worked within a space where painting and writing continually put each other to the test : many aspects of painting could not be described in words, and vice versa. In being required to essentially express the inexpressible, Diderot was compelled to question the legitimacy of both painting and writing. To do so, he had to become what Starobinski calls "un être pluriel, parlant plusieurs langages, [qui doit] se soumettre au principe de variabilité". Diderot had to speak multiple languages in that his criticism had to take many different literary forms in order to solve the problem of *ekphrasis*. In addition to simply stating his opinions, Diderot sometimes offers criticism by reporting conversations he has overheard at the Salon<sup>32</sup>, or in inventing imaginative scenarios. For instance, in the *Salon de 1763*, Diderot imagines Apollo and Mercury attending the Salon (Assézat X : 196) and subjecting the paintings of Venevault, Bachelier, Boizot and Millet to their criticism<sup>33</sup>. Another memorable example of an imaginative scenario comes in the *Salon de 1767*, where Diderot imagines himself to be on a

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<sup>32</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> Diderot adds to the hilarity of this scenario by imagining Apollo's reaction to two paintings of Mercury : "il vit le *Mercur* de Pierre et celui de Boizot, l'un *changeant en pierre Aglaure*, l'autre *conversant avec Argus*, et il dit: 'À effacer avec la langue pour avoir osé peindre des dieux sans en avoir d'idée...' Et *Mercur* l'embrasa" (Assézat X : 98).

trip to the seaside in order to critique the beautiful series of seascapes that Vernet exhibited that year (Assézat XI : 98). Diderot's critique of Vernet in the *Salon de 1767*, called the *Promenade Vernet*, is the length of a novella, and is a small literary masterpiece. Thus, in criticising art through the use of different literary forms, Diderot straddled the divide between literature and visual art, and in so doing, engaged in an act of Barthesian destruction. He destroyed one cultural norm, art criticism as it was before him, and created another : modern art criticism. For this reason, Diderot's *Salons* are texts of pleasure and texts of bliss for Diderot himself. In writing them, Diderot revelled in culture, but was also required to destroy it.

It will be noticed that modern reception theory has not been used as part of this theoretical framework. While reception theory is invaluable in gauging a viewer's response to a text or a painting, its populist approach is incompatible with a study of Diderot, who wrote for a limited and elitist audience and required that a reader have a substantial knowledge of aesthetics in order to experience the "delight" within a work of art. Bourdieu and Barthes advocate what we may call "hard intellectual work" as a precursor to true artistic enlightenment, and are therefore, we believe, a more suitable theoretical framework to a study of Diderot's *Salons* than reception theory.

### **2.3 Literature review**

The second part of this chapter will be divided into two parts. First, it will be demonstrated that the question of the development of the relationship between technique and ideal in Diderot's art criticism often forms part of works on Diderot's aesthetic or on the *Salons* in general without being the area of focus of these works (Chouillet 1973 ; Bukdahl 1980 ; Fried 1980 ; Starobinski 1991). We will argue that this question merits a study in its own right. Second, the single work (Lojkine 2009) which makes the question of the interdependence of technique and ideal in Diderot's art criticism its sole focus, will be examined. It will then be stated in what ways we will attempt to fill the existing lacunae with the current dissertation.

### 2.3.1 General studies on Diderot's aesthetic/studies of specific aspects of Diderot's aesthetic

The question of the development of the relationship between technique and ideal in Diderot's art criticism is often mentioned in works on the totality of Diderot's aesthetic or in those dealing specifically with the *Salons*. Chouillet (1973) and Bukdahl (1980) present Diderot as a philosopher who works towards the goal of the understanding of artistic unity throughout the entire development of his aesthetic. With regard to the works on the *Salons*, Fried (1980) interprets the *Salons* in terms of Diderot's great preoccupation with the depiction of absorptive states, while Starobinski (1991) seeks to identify Diderot's central concerns in that body of work. We will examine the manner in which the theme of the interdependence of technique and ideal is portrayed in these contexts in order to determine how this theme may be studied as an independent concept.

The two landmark studies concerned with the totality of the philosopher's aesthetic are those conducted by Chouillet (1973) and Bukdahl (1980). Both critics share the conviction that despite the inherent paradoxicality of Diderot's aesthetic philosophy, there is a constant idea running through it that may be defined as a search for perfect unity of form and content in a work of art. While this conviction that the constantly-contradictory chaos of Diderot's opinions is merely the means by which Diderot consciously achieves a particular, preconceived end has not been accepted by the majority of scholars since de Fontenay's 1981 study of Diderot's materialism, Chouillet and Bukdahl are still recognised as vital scholarship in the study of the *Salons*, and are still cited in the majority of texts on Diderot's aesthetics today (Déan 2000 ; Modica 2002 ; Lojkin 2007 ; Lavezzi 2007, Lavezzi 2012). Chouillet and Bukdahl's commentaries, and the manner in which these commentaries address the development of the relationship between technique and ideal in the *Salons*, are therefore no less important simply because the frameworks in which their studies occur are no longer recognised by the majority of scholars.

It is important to note that Chouillet's work only covers the period of 1745 to 1763, and thus only permits the examination of the development of Diderot's aesthetic in his early, less-detailed *Salons* (1759, 1761 and 1763). It is also important to note that while Chouillet and Bukdahl's ideas are similar, these two scholars work in very different contexts. Chouillet examines Diderot's aesthetic works written between 1745 and 1763 in order to establish the impact of certain works and philosophies on the development of the philosopher's aesthetic



ideas. Bukdahl's approach focuses more on Diderot's development of a methodology of art criticism throughout the entire period of his *Salons*. We will therefore deal with these two critics separately, despite the similarity of their ideas. A brief note on de Fontenay (1981) will also be included at the end of this section, for though her work does not focus on the *Salons*, it is necessary to discuss its importance in bringing to an end the idea of unity in multiplicity in scholarship on Diderot's aesthetic.

Chouillet's study is much concerned with the inherent futility of attempting to analyse Diderot's "tempérament artistique" (Chouillet 1973 : 9) through the study of his literary works. According to Chouillet, endeavouring to examine Diderot's formation as an individual is a fruitless enterprise when dealing with such a contradictory person. Chouillet also argues that the attempted identification or discussion of Diderot's aesthetic is equally fruitless : how can one hope to concretely define his aesthetic, or speak of its aspects, when every formula proposed by Diderot ultimately contradicts itself (1973 : 10)? All that the researcher can hope to achieve, according to Chouillet, is to seek out the evolution or development of Diderot's ideas ; ideas which despite the manifold paradoxes they present, are part of Diderot's search for what Chouillet calls *unité*.

The concept of *unité* is of great importance to Chouillet, and must therefore be defined before our discussion can proceed any further. Chouillet's *unité* refers to the unity of a work of art and how this is achieved ; the "modèle idéal" by which Diderot transformed his own aesthetic from the overly-emotional enthusiasm of the early *Salons* to the "apologie du sang-froid et de la raison" (Chouillet 1973 : 18-23) of the later *Salons*. To explain the concept of the *modèle idéal*, we will make use of Diderot's own analogy from the *Préambule* to the *Salon de 1767*. In this *Préambule*, the philosopher has a discussion with an artist who, when charged with creating a statue of a beautiful woman, studies the most beautiful body parts of a variety of different women and combines them into a single figure. The artist then judges his success according to the statue's conformity with the statues of Antiquity, which he has been made to study. Diderot condemns this method in a variety of ways. First, he questions the artist on how he would judge his success if Antiquity had never taken place : how indeed did the Ancients achieve such artistic perfection, having no Antiquity to which they might refer? Diderot then takes advantage of the artist's resulting silence to propose a new way for the artist to go about sculpting the statue. Diderot suggests that :

Le modèle le plus beau, le plus parfait d'un homme ou d'une femme, serait un homme ou une femme supérieurement propre à toutes les fonctions de la vie et parvenu à l'âge du plus entier développement, sans en avoir exercé aucune (Assézat XI : 12).

However, since nature has not even partially produced a man or woman that would conform to such a description, and since all humans have been marred or “déformés” to a certain extent by the experience of living, all humans have gradually grown more and more different from “la vérité, du modèle premier, de l'image intellectuelle”. It is this “vérité”, “modèle premier” and “image intellectuelle” that is meant by “le modèle idéal” : it is mankind as he might exist in the ideal realm posited by Plato in his theory of forms<sup>34</sup>. Though the artist will never see such a human being, Diderot nevertheless proposes a method by which the artist may manage to paint one without any slavish imitation of Antiquity.

Diderot claims that the Ancients achieved perfection through the long and difficult observation of all aspects of the world, no matter how unpleasant, so that they were able first to perceive the great and obvious effects of life on the world around them, and then to begin to notice the subtlest changes to the smallest parts of the human body that were brought about by nature. This ability, achieved through years of torturous observation, had to be wedded to a kind of supreme instinct ; an ability to imagine how mankind would look at his most perfect, and that was granted to a select few. It is this ability that Diderot calls “la ligne vraie”, and it is this that Chouillet means by *unité* ; the unity that Chouillet believes Diderot to be searching for and working towards in all the *Salons*, despite the philosopher's paradoxicality and constant contradictions of his own views. Chouillet's claim, therefore, is that while Diderot's aesthetic works may seem to contradict themselves, they are in fact part of a united whole that is reached by unconventional means.

Chouillet provides three principal reasons for choosing to reject the idea of Diderot's paradoxicality in favour of the notion that Diderot's early *Salons* are characterised by the search for a unity of aesthetic thought despite the constant evolution of opinion and knowledge that exists within the *Salons*. First, Chouillet does not consider Diderot's love of contradiction to be an impediment to unity of thought in the philosopher's work. Second, Chouillet recognises two different forms of aesthetic, implicit and explicit, that represent

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<sup>34</sup> “The world that appears to our senses is in some way defective and filled with error, but there is a more real and perfect realm, populated by entities (called “forms” or “ideas”) that are eternal, changeless, and in some sense paradigmatic for the structure and character of the world presented to our senses” (Kraut 2015).

complimentary aspects of the same reality : this fact allows for contradictions in Diderot's search for unity. Third, Chouillet proposes that since Diderot has proven himself to be a capable philosopher, he deserves to be treated like one, that is, seriously ; regardless of whether he chooses to express his thought in a rational manner, or to convey his wisdom through the appearance of insanity (Chouillet 1973 : 5). A further, equally important reason for Chouillet's belief in Diderot's expression of an aesthetic unity across such diverse and constantly-evolving literary works as the early *Salons* is Diderot's own view of beauty, which is characterised by a belief that true beauty is "une perception des rapports" :

Seul de son temps, peut-etre, [Diderot] a pensé que le "rapport" qui unit l'un au multiple est antérieur à l'unité, antérieur à la multiplicité ; que la fonction de l'esprit humain est d'établir des "rapports" ; que la beauté est une "perception des rapports" (Chouillet 1973 : 19).

Thus, according to Diderot, the purpose of humanity is to "établir des rapports", and it is through his perception of such "rapports" that mankind is able to recognise beauty. It is Chouillet's conviction that Diderot creates a link between the perception of connections and beauty, and is thus inspired in his search for unity, i.e. beauty, in his work. This leads Chouillet to believe that the search for unity is "la ligne directrice de [la] pensée esthétique de Diderot" (Chouillet 1973 : 23). The relationship between unity and multiplicity, Chouillet claims, is the "point de départ" (Chouillet 1973 : 643) for all of Diderot's investigations into both the aesthetic and the scientific.

According to Chouillet, Diderot's view of technique and ideal, as well as the development of this view, has its origins in the eighteenth-century idea of painting as the deferential imitation or copying of nature. This idea was vastly unpopular with those who practised painting<sup>35</sup>, and were thus in a position to appreciate the true meaning of the word "imitation" in this context. Nevertheless, to the general public, the imitation of nature and the copying of it were by and large considered to be the same thing (Lavezzi 2007 : 16-17). In the *Salon de 1759*, Diderot shared the public opinion that painters should copy nature, in other words, that they should paint what they see and add no embellishments of their own. It is interesting, however, that for Diderot, this copying could not be achieved through technique, but through ideal. Chouillet urges the reader to note that in 1759, Diderot is ignorant of artistic technique, and thus makes little or no mention of its importance in copying nature. Diderot instead turns to

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<sup>35</sup> See Falconet's criticism of Parrhasius : Chapter 3.

what he is not ignorant about, that is, emotion, and comes to the conclusion that the artist's ability to convey and provoke emotion, in other words the artist's ideal, is what will lead him to paint the truth. This opinion characterises Diderot's attitude to the imitation of nature in 1759.

In the *Salon de 1761*, however, Diderot's ideas on the true meaning of the imitation of nature evolves ; this because of the re-emergence at the time of what Chouillet calls "une esthétique de la grandeur", which brought with it a great deal of nostalgia for "la belle nature" in the art of painting (Chouillet 1973 : 572). The aesthetic concept of "la belle nature" rejects the servile copying of nature in favour of depicting what is most beautiful in it. Thus, to imitate nature, it was necessary for the artist to wed to it his own emotion and imagination in order to accurately convey its beauty, and to be guided in this by the Ancient Greeks and Romans, perceived as the models of taste and beauty at the time (Lavezzi 2007 : 21-22). According to Chouillet, Diderot's favouring of "la belle nature" reveals that at the time of the *Salon de 1761*, Diderot had come to understand that artists imitate rather than copy nature : this imitation, however, was still predominantly linked to ideal in Diderot's mind, by virtue of the imagination required of an artist to portray nature accurately.

Chouillet identifies further development in Diderot's views on the artist's portrayal of nature in the *Salon de 1763*. Diderot, while still giving preference to the portrayal of nature as the artist sees it, also begins to uphold the idea of the faithful representation of the subject of the painting (Chouillet 1973 : 573) in a way that is far more informed than the manner expressed in the *Salon de 1759*. A painter, while free to bring out what is most beautiful in nature through the use of his imagination in the conveying of emotion, is also bound to preserve some accuracy in his representation of nature. Diderot's focus on the preservation of accuracy may be attributed to his growing love of Chardin, exemplified in the following remark in the *Salon de 1763* : " C'est la nature même ; les objets sont hors de la toile et d'une vérité à tromper les yeux " (Assézat X : 194). Chouillet also emphasises Diderot's tendency to assign greater importance to the painting's effect on the spectator than to the technique that is employed by the artist to bring that effect about. It is this emotional effect that guarantees whether or not Diderot considers the scene to be painted with *vraisemblance* : a viewer can only respond with emotion to a painting if he believes that he is contemplating reality.

Chouillet concludes his study of Diderot's aesthetic development in the early *Salons* by stating that Diderot's ultimate realisation in *all* his *Salons*, not merely the early ones, is that

the mastery of the creation of the illusion of reality is a long and time-consuming process for any artist, requiring patience, time, and the constant study of such technical elements as perspective, harmony, light, colour, and their endless combination (Chouillet 1973 : 576). This learning process can only be effective through making mistakes and starting again. It is also here that Chouillet comments on Diderot's perception of technique in the early *Salons*, stating that it is in these formative works of art criticism that Diderot comes to realise the importance of technique in the creative process. He thus proves superior to other critics like La Font de Saint Yenne and le Comte de Caylus, with their pages of technical analysis that never quite reveal their ultimate *raison d'être* (Chouillet 1973 : 575). Chouillet states that Diderot's superiority lies in his ability to conduct technical analysis while engaging with the reader on the role technique has to play in art and the reasons for which technique is just as important as the imagination of the artist in creating a work of art. Chouillet also states that Diderot was the first critic to make the role of technique in art intelligible to non-artists. He was the first to demonstrate that a great idea and a great imagination are insufficient if one hopes to create a great painting : the idea must be developed with technique, through "un système harmonique" (Chouillet 1973 : 576) that makes this possible, and that exploits its greatness to the maximum. Chouillet believes that Diderot reaches this realisation through his search for unity. The search for unity is Diderot's reason for preferring ideal in the very earliest *Salons* before his realisation, through greater experience, that technique plays a role in painting that is just as vital.

Bukdahl (1980), like Chouillet, is motivated by the conviction that there exists across all Diderot's *Salons* a unity in multiplicity. Bukdahl's premise is different from Chouillet's in that she considers unity to be a notion that was only marginally clear to Diderot from the beginning, and that became a way for Diderot to reconcile his various, and often contradictory points of view under the auspices of a concept that becomes gradually more important as the *Salons* progress. Bukdahl defines unity as "la conception de la totalité artistique en tant qu'unité fonctionnelle du plan du contenu et de celui de la forme" (Bukdahl 1980 : 26). Unity is thus an idea that encapsulates the complete totality of a work of art, both in terms of its content, and in term of its form, in other words in terms of its technique and ideal. Bukdahl therefore treats the idea of unity, or artistic totality, as one that is developed by Diderot throughout the *Salons* by using a variety of different critical methods and his own constantly-developing artistic knowledge, all with the aim of creating a methodology of art criticism. In approaching the *Salons* in such a way, Diderot is able to enrich his knowledge in

a manner that allows him to discover previously unknown aspects of style and genre and to propose a concrete, descriptive method and manner of judgement built on “l’analyse du jeu conjugué entre la théorie et la pratique de l’art” (Bukdahl 1980 : 27) : in other words, between technique and ideal.

While Bukdahl’s ideas are similar to Chouillet’s, they are unique in that Bukdahl devotes much more attention to the study of the relationship between technique and ideal than Chouillet, and does not confine herself to the early *Salons*. This enables her to discuss this idea in greater detail. Bukdahl also provides us with a definitive statement that Diderot’s work is divided into “la partie technique” and “la partie idéale” and with concrete definitions of technique and ideal: “Technique=forme, maîtrise des procédés artistiques. Idéale=contenu, imagination, connaissance de littérature” (Bukdahl 1980 : 328-329). Bukdahl defines technique as the form of a work of art, and of the mastery of artistic procedure, i.e. the ability to draw, paint, sculpt and to do it well. Ideal is defined as everything to do with the content of the work of art, with the imagination, presumably both of the artist and the viewer, and a “connaissance de littérature”. This term no doubt refers to the knowledge of literature that was required to create history paintings, as well as to the general cultural competence, or iconography, mentioned by Bourdieu. Bukdahl then goes into further detail as to the purpose of Diderot’s criticism of technique and ideal respectively : technique is a “critique de la vérité” (Bukdahl 1980 : 41), while ideal constitutes a “critique de l’expressivité” (Bukdahl 1980 : 347). Thus, Diderot’s criticism of the technical aspects of a painting are concerned with how accurately a work of art portrays its subject, while the philosopher’s criticism of ideal deals with how accurately or inaccurately the painting expresses the emotions that it seeks to convey.

Before her discussion on the relationship between technique and ideal, Bukdahl examines the separate importance of each individual concept. In terms of technique, and its use in criticism, Bukdahl claims that the methods used by Diderot when he critiques the technique of a work of art begin to take shape in the *Salons de 1759, 1761 and 1763*, and reach their apogee in the *Salons de 1765 et 1767*, only to have their importance diminish in the four *Salons* that follow the *Salon de 1767* (Bukdahl 1980 : 329). Diderot learns about technique from many artists, including Chardin, Greuze, La Tour, Falconet, Vien, Cochin, and Vernet (Bukdahl 1980 : 332-333), whom he would often accompany to the *Salons*. As Diderot never informs the reader of the *Salons* how much he has benefitted from these interactions, it is

impossible to tell how much of his technical knowledge comes from research and how much from spending time in the company of artists. We thus have nothing but the texts of the *Salons* to determine the degree of Diderot's artistic knowledge : we can only guess where he learned certain things (Bukdahl 1980 : 334). However much he learned independently, Diderot validates the opinions he expresses on technique in the *Salons* through a description of a work's formal qualities and often through technical analysis that is very precise (Bukdahl 1980 : 330). This is particularly true of the later *Salons*, which contain lengthy technical analyses. Despite his evident talent for technical analysis in the later *Salons*, Diderot often criticises painters for concentrating too much on the technical aspects of a work of art, while neglecting its emotional, moral and literary aspects (Bukdahl 1980 : 346). Indeed, there are multiple instances when Diderot claims that if a work of art is aimed solely at the eyes of the viewer and does not grasp the sensibility, imagination or intellect of the viewer, then that work of art is imperfect, no matter how much technical perfection it may demonstrate<sup>36</sup> (Bukdahl 1980 : 347). In terms of ideal, one of Diderot's primary aims is to make it obvious to the layman that there is a clear connection between form and content, and that it is not possible to truly understand the content of a work of art without a precise analysis of the technique used to create it (Bukdahl 1980 : 370). In this discussion of technique and ideal as separate concepts, Bukdahl has demonstrated the independent importance of each, before touching on Diderot's recognition of their interdependence.

Bukdahl claims that the manner in which technique and ideal are viewed with varying degrees of importance in Diderot's *Salons* leads him to the recognition of their equal importance in painting. In the first two *Salons*, for instance, Diderot often discusses the emotions he feels when looking at paintings, but neglects to explain the role of technique in creating those emotions (Bukdahl 1980 : 351). According to Bukdahl, it is only in the *Salon de 1763* that Diderot begins to look at technique with anything resembling seriousness. In his critique of Deshayes' *Mariage de la Vierge*, Diderot goes against the advice and opinions of the artists he has consulted by declaring that it is Deshayes' choice of palette in this painting that has created its emotional beauty. This single instance, however, does not constitute sovereign proof of a newfound and universal respect for technique. It is only in the *Salon de 1765* that Diderot makes a statement to the effect that "intensité émotive et stimulation de l'imagination provoquées par une peinture d'histoire dépendent d'égale manière du choix du

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<sup>36</sup> For a detailed discussion of this, see Chapter 5 for our analysis of Diderot's critique of Vien's *Saint Denis prêchant la foi et France* in the *Salon de 1767* : "Vien dessine bien ; peint bien ; mais il ne pense ni ne sent (...) on n'apprend jamais ce que le peintre de la predication de Denis ignore" (Assézat XI : 35).

sujet et de la façon dont celui-ci est traité” (Bukdahl 1980 : 351). With this realisation, Diderot recognises that stimulating a viewer’s emotion and capturing his imagination depend equally upon the choice of subject, and upon the manner in which it is presented. He thus recognises, says Bukdahl, that technique and ideal are interdependent and play equal roles in the success or failure of a work of art.

Chouillet and Bukdahl’s perspectives on Diderot’s search for unity are not recognised in today’s scholarship (Déan 2000) despite the importance of these two critics in shaping the study of Diderot’s aesthetic. The reason for this is Chouillet and Bukdahl’s view that Diderot’s love of paradox and contradiction in the expression of his ideas is part of the philosopher’s goal of attaining an understanding of artistic unity. Chouillet and Bukdahl do not view this aspect of Diderot’s expression as being a simple, if challenging part of his personality, but as a means, on Diderot’s part, to an end : the understanding of artistic unity. It is because of de Fontenay’s 1981 work *Diderot ou le matérialisme enchanté* that this aspect of Chouillet and Bukdahl’s otherwise meticulous scholarship is no longer recognised today. Though de Fontenay makes *Le Neveu de Rameau*, *L’Encyclopédie* and Diderot’s letters to Sophie Volland her point of reference, rather than the *Salons*, de Fontenay’s work has such impact that the entire discipline of Diderot studies was influenced by it and is still influenced (Kryssing-Berg 1985 ; Rebejkow 1997 ; Asselin 2006 ; Pujol 2011) by her perspective on Diderot’s contradictory way of expressing himself.

De Fontenay summarises her thesis as follows :

Diderot peut paraître obscur, et surtout à ceux qui continuent de révéler les mathématiques et de croire qu’il suffit que les idées soient claires et distinctes pour qu’elles saisissent la réalité. Or les aperçus de la philosophie naturelle brillent le plus souvent d’une obscure clarté et d’une confusion féconde, qui ne sont pas manquement aux Lumières : “Voici venir le temps des brouillards, et vous savez que les métaphysiciens ressemblent aux bécasses”. Et encore : “Pour moi, qui m’occupe plutôt à former des nuages qu’à les dissiper...”. Ces propos ne doivent pas étonner. Encore une fois, le décousu et l’obscur signalent une pensée dont la naissance et la destination rompent avec l’histoire de la philosophie. “Le philosophe doit se montrer avec le mauvais temps, c’est sa saison” (de Fontenay 1981 : 258).

De Fontenay readily acknowledges the difficulties of interpreting Diderot, and how his works may often appear obscure. However, she is utterly against the notion that ideas have to be



clear – or appear to be clear – in order to accurately reflect reality. According to de Fontenay, the most brilliant ideas of natural philosophy often shine brighter when viewed through a kaleidoscope of chaos ; an idea that she eloquently expresses with the phrase “les aperçus de la philosophie naturelle brillent le plus souvent d’une obscure clarté et d’une confusion féconde” (de Fontenay 1981 : 258). De Fontenay specifies that ideas expressed in this manner characterise the Age of Enlightenment, which Diderot himself refers to as “le temps des brouillards” or “the time of fog”. Ideas expressed in this manner are also typical of Diderot’s writing, which the philosopher himself readily admits without much evidence of being ashamed of himself : “Pour moi, qui m’occupe plutôt à former des nuages qu’à les dissiper”. De Fontenay insists that this does not make Enlightenment thought or Diderotian thought inferior, but rather that the love of paradox inherent in Diderot’s work signals a clear departure from the history of philosophy ; from philosophy as it has always been, and from what has, in philosophy, always been considered normal. De Fontenay quotes Diderot himself, who insists that the philosopher must show himself during bad times : that is where he belongs and where he may prove to be most useful. The point of de Fontenay’s emphasis on this “temps des brouillards”, “confusion féconde” and “formation des nuages” is to show that there does not need to be a great, overriding point to Diderot’s love of contradiction that is unique to his aesthetic and is exercised with the conscious aim of achieving “le modèle idéale”. Diderot’s love of contradiction represents something much bigger, and something that is consistent with the aims of the Enlightenment as a whole : the rejection of old systems and the seeking-out and creation of new ones. Widmer, in his 1981 review of de Fontenay’s *Diderot, ou le matérialisme enchanté*, briefly summarises de Fontenay’s meaning here :

Il n’y a pas *une* vérité, il y en a plusieurs, fragiles et floues, entre lesquelles personne n’est compétent pour avoir l’autorité de choisir seul. Elles doivent pouvoir coexister, jouer leur libre jeu, pourvu qu’elles ne mettent pas en danger l’ordre minimal qui permet à la pluralité d’exister. Diderot avait une conscience aigüe de l’impossibilité d’édifier un ordre souverain, total, “réconciliant” dans l’immédiat toutes les contradictions (Widmer 1981).

De Fontenay’s vision of the eighteenth-century “truth” is that truth itself is a complex machine founded on scepticism and on freedom : the freedom to doubt, and the freedom to decide. The truth is fluid rather than set in stone : it is different for each individual, and no single individual can declare his truth to be absolute. Ideas too should be allowed to coexist in this way, and freely, provided that they do not endanger the public order that makes such

peaceful coexistence possible. Diderot was profoundly conscious that a central, total order that would immediately solve all contradictions could never exist, and he embraced this consciousness to a vast degree in many of his works.

De Fontenay's thesis that Diderot's love of paradoxes, constant contradictions and refusal to justify their existence by entertaining notions of there being a great, overriding truth or point to them, directly contradicts the conviction of Chouillet and Bukdahl that Diderot's paradoxicality is merely the means to an end : the end being of achieving and understanding artistic unity. De Fontenay's work is so significant that very few scholars accept unity in multiplicity today, and prefer to engage with de Fontenay's embracing of Diderot's inconsistency.

Chouillet and Bukdahl's interpretations of Diderot's aesthetic shed a great deal of light on any attempt to determine the evolution of the relationship between technique and ideal in Diderot's *Salons*. Both sources are indispensable in that they show Diderot's predominant focus on ideal in the early *Salons*, while also demonstrating how it was in these same early works of art criticism that the philosopher became more and more aware that he needed to become familiar with artistic technique. While it is true that Diderot preferred to ignore technique in the early *Salons*, and even to mock it, it is equally true that the philosopher grudgingly began to admit, around 1763, that technique might have some use. In terms of the identification of any potential interdependence of technique and ideal, there is far more material in Bukdahl's work than in Chouillet's. This is because Bukdahl explicitly names technique and ideal and defines these two concepts as separate entities, before discussing the relationship between them, albeit briefly. The greater detail of her reflections on these two aspects of Diderot's criticism, may be attributed to her decision to discuss the *Salons de 1765* and *1767* in detail rather than deal with them in general terms.

In the cases of both Chouillet and Bukdahl, their comments on technique and ideal, and the relationship between these two concepts, form only a small part of a larger work on Diderot's aesthetic. Their treatment of this issue, while meticulous and in-depth, is incomplete, and thus, does not provide a complete understanding of the notion of the interdependence between technique and ideal in Diderot's critique of the *Salons*. The centrality to Diderot's art criticism of the question of the development of these two concepts has already been discussed in the introduction to this chapter. However, this question is but a small part of these two supremely important books on Diderot's aesthetic. Furthermore, Chouillet and

Bukdahl both demonstrate the conviction that throughout the time period of the *Salons*, Diderot was consciously working towards a system of thought that would enable him to understand unity of form and content in a works of art. This idea has since been refuted by de Fontenay (1981). For de Fontenay, Diderot's love of paradox is a means of attaining this goal of artistic unity ; indeed, Chouillet himself claims that the reader should have sufficient respect for Diderot to accept that there was method (i.e. the search for artistic unity) in what would sometimes appear to be madness (i.e. Diderot's love of contradiction). However, Chouillet's perspective, which is shared by Bukdahl, presents Diderot's paradoxicality and constant contradicting of himself as characteristics that should have a greater purpose (i.e. the understanding of artistic unity) if their existence is to be justified ; that is, as characteristics that should be tolerated rather than accepted. An elementary study of the *Salon de 1759*, particularly its opening lines<sup>37</sup>, reveals that Diderot himself, in writing this *Salon*, has very little idea of how to interpret art or indeed whether that was what was expected of him, and was very likely unaware that he was embarking on a journey that would culminate in so significant a work as the *Salon de 1767*.

Thus, in terms of determining the relationship between technique and ideal and how it develops, Chouillet and Bukdahl provide valuable insight into Diderot's separate treatment of the two concepts, but do not fully discuss the nature of their relationship in order to conclude that the two concepts become interdependent over time. The interdependence of these concepts is more important to the development of Diderot's aesthetic than their separate functions, as it is only in recognising the symbiotic nature of technique and ideal that Diderot became an art critic unique to his time and significant to posterity. In this dissertation we attempt to fill this lacuna in what are vital studies on both Diderot's aesthetic and his *Salons*.

Starobinski's 1991 article on the *Salons* demonstrates the manner in which the question of the development of the relationship between technique and ideal is often present as part of a work on the *Salons* in general, but is not treated as an independent topic. Starobinski's article is a short, but vital study that discusses most of the *Salons'* fundamental and remarkable aspects, among them the role of morality in the *Salons*, the hierarchy of genres, Diderot's creation of imagined, virtual reality paintings with which to critique art, and the philosopher's constant praising, criticising and questioning of his role as an art critic. This article is most significant to the study of the *Salons* in that Starobinski thoroughly demonstrates the

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<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 3.

philosopher's use of narrative technique and literary art ; this in order to create the ideal aesthetic experience that “[abolishes] the duality between thinking and feeling experienced in front of the painting” (Pierce 2012 : 81).

In Starobinski, the notion of the interdependence of technique and ideal is not a primary concern, though it is alluded to and at times mentioned, albeit indirectly. We will give an example of a direct mention of this relationship so as to demonstrate how, and in what context, this notion is touched upon in this important article.

In the course of a discussion focussing on Diderot's emphasis on the role of emotion, and thus on the role of ideal, in the early *Salons*, Starobinski directly mentions Diderot's expression of an awareness of a relationship between technique and ideal. While Starobinski acknowledges the interdependence of the painter's ability to imitate nature (technique) and his ability to experience intense emotion (ideal), he does not discuss this interdependence further or elaborate on the above statement. He thus makes a direct reference to the relationship between technique and ideal, a relationship that is the crux of Diderot's methodology of art criticism, but does not undertake a detailed examination of that relationship. Starobinski's area of focus in this instance is Diderot's conviction that while immaculate technique is a necessary component in a work's greatness, it is not the sole determining factor in the judgment of such greatness. Starobinski writes :

La valeur mimétique de la peinture et sa capacité pathétique sont interdépendantes : la vérité de la représentation se juge en vertu de l'intensité de l'émotion suscitée, et vice versa. Les qualités picturales “pures” (celles que notre œil aujourd'hui privilégie) ne sont pas ignorées par Diderot ; mais ce sont des qualités subalternes; pour mieux dire, ce sont des conditions nécessaires, mais non-suffisantes (1991 : 228).

Starobinski's treatment of the relationship between technique and ideal, a central pairing in Diderot's methodology of art criticism, is brief, as this pairing is not the focus of his study. However, this brevity as demonstrated in this important study of the *Salons* also suggests that there is a need for the interdependence of these two concepts to be investigated so as to establish in detail how this pairing, so important to Diderot's aesthetic, was developed and put into practice.

The role of the spectator in relation to the painting being critiqued is another aspect of Diderot's aesthetic which has given rise to some very important scholarship. In these studies, reference is made to Diderot's awareness of the relationship between technique and ideal, as well as its development and its impact on Diderot's *Salons*. Much like in Chouillet and Bukdahl's studies on unity in multiplicity, this scholarship does not make the development of the relationship between technique and ideal in Diderot's *Salons* its focal point.

A landmark study by Michael Fried (1980) has had an impact on many other studies on Diderot's *Salons* (Starobinski 1991 ; Bocquillon 2003 ; Gaillard 2007 ; Cammagre et Talon-Hugon 2007). It was the first work on Diderot's aesthetic to discuss and reinterpret the *Salons* in terms of the depiction, in painting, of figures engaged in "absorption", i.e. figures so utterly transfixed by the activity in which they are engaged that they seem unaware of the spectator's existence. Fried's thesis is that by painting a figure in an absorptive state, the artist is able to bring the viewer more completely into the world of the painting by eliminating any sense, on the viewer's part, of intruding into the space or state occupied by the figure in the painting. The artist is thus able to heighten the sense of reality conveyed to the viewer.

Fried begins by placing absorption in the context of Diderot's time. Absorption in painting, and its ability to create a heightened sense of realism, was little understood in the eighteenth century. The concept was highly fashionable in the 1750's despite this lack of understanding, so much so that a painter's ability to properly capture an absorptive state came to be seen as a skill that only the most brilliant were capable of. This caused many painters, notably Greuze, to digress dramatically from the norm in the aim of portraying absorption convincingly, with these digressions taking place both in terms of technique and in terms of ideal (Fried 1980 : 107). Despite the popularity of the concept of absorption in the 1750's, and the lengths to which artists would go to conform to it, very little progress was made towards the comprehension of how absorption worked, or of how the negation of the viewer could heighten a particular painting's realism.

Fried states that in the 1760's, the painting of absorptive states declined in popularity. This decline was because of the *Académie*'s favouring of history painting by placing it at the top of the hierarchy of genres, and by granting greater prestige and higher levels of membership of the *Académie* to history painters. Many critics, including, Diderot, with his customary

paradoxicality, promoted this hierarchical system multiple times in the *Salons*<sup>38</sup>, even though “Diderot almost never saw a big historical painting of which he approved or a Chardin that he disliked” (Wilson 1972 : 461). Indeed, Diderot’s only challenge to this system was to call for a re-evaluation of what constituted history painting, so that certain genre and landscape paintings that evoked the nobler human emotions could gain the recognition that Diderot thought they deserved.

Fried argues that Diderot’s advancement of history painting was not the result of conservatism or excessive respect for the establishment, but because the composition of the history painting was highly conducive to absorption. History painting depicts “rigorously causal” (Fried 1980: 108), grandiose action. This action proceeds outwards from a central, focal point to impact on every important expressive and formal aspect of the painting, particularly unity and harmony. In so doing, the action renders the painting a perfect snapshot in time : a world of its own in which the figures are completely absorbed in what they are doing. Thus, in order for the action of a history painting to be truly grandiose, and to truly capture the high drama of absolute reality, the painting must not acknowledge or seem to require the beholder’s presence in order to exist. The painting must not be conceived as a painting, but as a play : its very conception must be dramatic in nature, in order to secure maximum absorption. Like a play, this dramatic conception of painting depends on “the establishment of the supreme fiction that the beholder was not there” (Fried 1980 : 108), though, paradoxically, this can only be achieved if the beholder is arrested by the painting. Alternatively, one may also claim that only in representing the complete absorption of figures is it possible to establish their aloneness relative to the beholder ; an idea that was praised by Diderot in the *Salons* of the late 1760’s and widely applied in his dramatic theories. From Diderot’s privileging of history painting, and the centrality of absorption to history painting, Fried concludes that absorption is a central concern in Diderot’s art criticism.

It is not Fried’s theories on absorption and history painting that are relevant to this thesis, but rather the role of absorption in relationship to Diderot’s theories on drama. These theories, outlined by Diderot in works such as *Le Fils Naturel* and *Entretiens sur le fils naturel* (1757), *De la poésie dramatique* (1758), and *Le père de famille* (1761) have an important influence on certain parts of the *Salons*, notably on Diderot’s analysis of Greuze’s *L’Accordée du*

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<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 1.

*Village*<sup>39</sup>. To understand the role of absorption in relation to Diderot's theories on drama, it is necessary to understand the central invention of these theories, the *tableau dramatique*. The essence of the *tableau dramatique* is that the actors must position themselves and interact with each other on stage in a way that is so effortlessly true to life that a painter, in transferring the scene created on stage to canvas, could easily produce an agreeable work of art (Worvill 2010 : 151). The actors are only able to bring about this illusion of reality if they are able to convince the audience that they are unaware of being watched, in other words that they are *absorbed* in what they are doing (Fried 1980 : 108). Similarly, the figures in paintings that Diderot critiques using his own dramatic theories, such as *L'Accordée du Village*, appear unaware that they are being watched, and thus "negate" (Worvill 2011 : 108) the existence of the beholder.

Fried's work is immensely important in the study of Diderot's aesthetic. However, because the focal point of this study is the identification and achievement of absorption and the in-depth discussion of its effect, Fried has little opportunity to establish how absorption may be impeded, or what aspects of technique and ideal could impact on this impediment. Therefore Fried, like Starobinski, is an example of vitally-important scholarship on the *Salons* in which the relationship between technique and ideal is not dealt with fully.

Lojkine's 2009 article *Le technique contre l'idéal : la crise de l'ut pictura poesis dans les Salons de Diderot* is the only work of scholarship to date in which the relationship between technique and ideal in Diderot's art criticism is the central focus. Lojkine pursues the classical Chouillet/Bukdahl argument on the symbiotic nature of the rapport between technique and ideal, but in relation to Diderot's understanding of the impact of the *ut pictura poesis* on the art of his day. *Ut pictura poesis*, a concept made famous by Horace's *Ars Poetica*, proposes that poetry and painting can and should be interpreted in the same way, and with equal care and respect. While much respected in Diderot's day, the concept's tendency to bind literature to painting, rather than allowing painting to stand as an independent art form, was unequivocally loathed by the philosopher himself, and he took much trouble, in the *Salons*, to eradicate the public's respect for it. Diderot's dislike of Horace's concept of *ut pictura poesis* is an important part of Lojkine's entire body of work. This body of work includes Lojkine's discussion of the *Salons* in terms of their place and *raison d'être* in the totality of Diderot's aesthetic, and their importance in the history of art (2007). Another

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 3.

important study by Lojkin that investigates Diderot's mistrust of *ut pictura poesis* is the former's 2010 comparative study of Diderot's critique of Doyen and Vien in the *Salon de 1767* (2010)<sup>40</sup>.

Lojkin begins his 2009 study of the importance of technique and ideal in Diderot's art criticism with a study of the *Salons* written between 1761 and 1763, that is, the *Salons* in which Diderot's understanding and appreciation of technique are still emerging. At this point, Diderot's disregard for technique stems from his conviction that technique has no contribution to make to the ideal of a work and is often used by painters as an excuse to avoid painting with *vraisemblance*. An example of this conviction may be found in Diderot's critique of Parocel's *Adoration*, where a richly-decorated cushion stands garishly out in the otherwise humble setting of the stable where Christ is born. Despite the fact that the artist has taken the trouble to specify, rather quaintly, in the Salon's *livret* that "un des rois avait envoyé un coussin d'avance par son écuyer pour pouvoir se prosterner avec plus de commodité" (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XIII : 258), Diderot finds this justification ridiculous, claiming that "les artistes sont tellement attentifs aux beautés techniques, qu'ils négligent toutes ces impertinences-là dans le jugement qu'ils portent d'une production" (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XIII : 258). Diderot's description of the cushion as an impertinence brought about to add colour and ornamentation to the painting characterises his attitude to technique in the early *Salons*. Diderot perceives technique as forming part of a painting regardless of whether or not it has a poetic, or indeed logical place in the work in question : the artist believes that the technical beauty afforded by colour and ornamentation technique is necessary, and so includes them for no legitimate reason. Lojkin develops this idea in his discussion of three important aspects of technique, namely colour, harmony and layout. and how Diderot's attitude to them develops in the early *Salons* (Lojkin 2009).

From 1759 to 1763, colour is one of the most frequent objects of Diderot's criticism. An example is Diderot's critique of Van Loo's *Les Grâces enchaînées par l'amour*<sup>41</sup>. This painting's garish hues of blue deeply offend Diderot's intellectual sensibilities, not the least because this gaudy palette does not merely compromise the painting's sense of realism, but removes it completely. Van Loo's painting is thus an example of the manner in which technique may ruin a painting's ideal rather than contribute to it, and in which Diderot may therefore feel justified in questioning its role in painting.

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<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 3.



Harmony as an artistic technique is accorded importance equal to colour in the *Salons* of 1759 to 1763 because of what Diderot comes to believe is its function of substituting natural harmony rather than perfectly duplicating it. Diderot expresses this conviction using the analogy that since painters do not paint with the flesh and blood they seek to portray, but with paint, an artificial material, the closest a painter may come to duplicating natural harmony is to refine his knowledge of technique, and thus to develop his own style. This will provide the harmony required. In these comments on the importance of natural harmony, it is possible to perceive a significant shift in Diderot's attitude to technique towards the end of the early *Salons*. Technique is no longer a kind of *savoir faire* that artists feel obliged to include in a painting, even at the risk of ruining it, but is an aspect of painting requiring intelligence and intellectual questioning on the part of the artist (Lojkine 2009)<sup>42</sup>.

This new intellectuality of technique is the third important aspect of Lojkine's study relating to the development of Diderot's approach to technique in the early *Salons*, particularly in terms of its impact on the layout<sup>43</sup> of a painting. The manner in which an artist develops his own style, or technique, as a substitute for natural harmony, creates a paradox in that the more technique is employed in a painting, the less it comes to resemble reality. The artist is no longer painting a scene, but his own vision of it : a translation of it, in effect. It therefore follows that if an artist is to achieve a mastery of technique, he does so by creating works of art that are fundamentally different from the reality they represent. In recognising technique's fundamental role in "translating" nature through art, says Lojkine, Diderot gives technique a central role in the painting's layout, or *ordonnance* and infuses technique with a new kind of poetic function, for the visual harmony, or *style*, of the painting translates the scene in the same way that a poet or playwright's emotions translate something that he sees and feels simultaneously. This successfully contradicts the principles of *ut pictura poesis* by taking poetry out of the domain of the literary and into the realm of the visual.

According to Lojkine, the significance of the *Salon de 1765* lies in the manner in which Diderot not only acknowledges the existence of a relationship between technique and ideal, as he does in the *Salon de 1763*, but begins to think of this relationship as "l'opposition de base pour penser et pour évaluer le processus de la création artistique", "le concept opératoire fondamental pour penser une poétique de la peinture" and "les deux critères exclusifs du

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<sup>42</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>43</sup> " (...) la disposition même des figures dans l'espace du tableau, qui équivalait au canevas de la pièce de théâtre" (Lojkine 2009).

jugement de l'œuvre" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>44</sup>. Lojkin examines two important instances in the *Salon de 1765* in which Diderot demonstrates the new importance he accords to the relationship between these two concepts. In the first instance, Diderot states at the end of the *Salon's* article on sculpture that "la peinture se divise en technique et idéale, et l'une et l'autre se sous-divisent en peinture en portrait, peinture de genre et peinture historique" ; an observation that is significant not merely by virtue of Diderot's assigning equal importance to technique and ideal, but also by the way in which he appears to consider this relationship to be a concept as central to painting as the hierarchy of genres. In the second instance, Diderot reflects on how a young artist should study :

Un élève qui mettrait au prix un pareil barbouillage n'irait ni à la pension, ni à Rome. Il faut abandonner ces sujets-là à celui qui sait les faire valoir par le technique et par l'idéal (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XIV : 74 in Lojkin 2009)<sup>45</sup>.

With this comment, Diderot suggests that an artist who does not know how to exploit a subject to its full potential through the correct employment of technique and ideal will never win the Académie's prestigious prize. In being denied this prize, and the opportunity to study at *l'Académie de France* in Rome, the young artist is denied all chance at a successful career, which is only granted to those who have mastered the employment of technique of ideal.

While this new privileging of the pairing of technique and ideal has every appearance of Diderot recognising the equal value of the two concepts, this is not the case. Technique remains "le parent pauvre" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>46</sup> of the couple, though many of Diderot's comments in the *Salon de 1765*, such as his critiques of Deshayes and Fragonard, do not immediately suggest this. Diderot continues to state that great technique does not compensate for bad ideal, whereas great ideal, executed poorly, is overlooked. Lojkin claims that it would be erroneous, however, to suggest that technique's continued status as "le parent pauvre" in the *Salon de 1765* means that Diderot's attitude to technique is as dismissive as it is in the early *Salons* ; this, he explains, is because it is in this *Salon* that Diderot undertakes a revision of the hierarchy of genres in a way that gives technique a more central role in Diderot's art criticism.

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<sup>44</sup> No page number provided in web document.

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<sup>46</sup> No page number provided in web document.

Before this *Salon de 1765*, continues Lojkiné, Diderot had always considered history painting to be the genre that required the most genius, emotion and creative energy. As all of these concepts are linked to ideal rather than to technique, it can be concluded that before the *Salon de 1765*, an undeniable link between ideal and the execution of a history painting existed in Diderot's mind. Conversely, in genre painting, Diderot had always considered technique to be the most important area of mastery, because this category of painting requires "l'étude et de la patience, nulle verve, peu de génie, guère de poésie, beaucoup de technique et de vérité, et puis c'est tout" (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XIV : 118 in Lojkiné 2009)<sup>47</sup>. Lojkiné points out that the true meaning behind this phrase is "exceller dans le technique, c'est être né vieux ; le génie, l'enthousiasme créateur se portent tout entiers du côté de l'idéal" (Lojkiné 2009)<sup>48</sup>. It is in this *Salon*, however, that Diderot challenges and overturns the notion of technique as the province of the old. He declares :

Or vous savez que le temps où nous nous mettons à ce qu'on appelle d'après l'usage la recherche de la vérité, la philosophie, est précisément celui où nos tempes grisonnent et où nous aurions mauvaise grâce à écrire une lettre galante (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XIV : 118 in Diderot in Lojkiné 2009)<sup>49</sup>.

With this statement that philosophy and the search for truth are best undertaken later in life, Diderot interprets old age, which he had previously criticised as being the enemy of genius, as being linked to wisdom. Lojkiné clarifies Diderot's meaning : a wise (and presumably old) painter does not devote himself to the simple practice of his art, but reflects on the best way to paint, i.e. he contemplates how technique may best be utilised, and this before he begins to apply paint to canvas. In transferring technique to the realm of contemplation rather than practice, Diderot has transformed technique into the ideal of ideal, "l'idéal de son idéal" (Lojkiné 2009)<sup>50</sup>. Technique is no longer associated merely with the practice of art, but with conscious, philosophical *reflection* on its purpose. This deepens the degree of intellectuality that Diderot has previously accorded to technique. In placing technique within ideal, rather than in relation to it, Diderot has demonstrated the ultimate interdependence of the two concepts. No longer opposed, they become one and the same.

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<sup>47</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>48</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>49</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>50</sup> No page number provided in web document.

In displacing technique into the realm of ideal, Diderot then finds a way to maintain technique's presence in the actual, physical creation of painting. This is achieved through the painting's *ordonnance*, or layout. Diderot observes :

Je m'amuse ici à causer avec vous d'autant plus volontiers que je ne vous dirai de Chardin qu'un seul mot, et le voici : Choisissez son site, disposez sur ce site les objets comme je vous les indique, et soyez sûr que vous aurez vu ses tableaux (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XIV : 118 in Lojkin 2009)<sup>51</sup>.

As Lojkin points out, technique is no longer a matter of colour, for example, or light, but simply involves the decision to lay a number of objects out in a certain way. In making technique a part of his reflections before beginning to paint, the artist has ensured that technique has been abolished, and has disappeared "dans la magie de l'art" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>52</sup>, so that the physical manifestation of the painting is reduced to something very simple : its layout.

In promoting this ideal of a painting planned in the artist's mind before its execution, Diderot has invented one of his most celebrated ideas : the virtual reality painting. The basis of this concept is that before the artist begins to sketch on paper or paint on canvas, a mental representation of the image he intends to paint already exists in his imagination. This mental representation, a kind of virtual reality painting, may, throughout the planning and execution of a work of art, be in a constant state of flux as the artist's ideas develop, but also acts as a valuable source of reference and motivation for the artist as to the desired final result of his endeavours. For Diderot, however, the virtual reality painting is not, a device that should exist only for the use of artists, but should also be present in the imagination of the critic as a means of evaluating the finished work of art. When the critic is only aware of the work's title or subject matter, he will imagine the painting before seeing it, according to his own tastes and expectations, before evaluating the painting in terms of how it compares with what he has imagined. Thus, while the artist's version of the painting exists in order to paint, the critic's version exists so that he may use his imagination to evaluate faults in the actual artwork, and to explore ways in which they might have been avoided.

Lojkin points out that this integration of technique into ideal does not detract from the importance of an artist's technical knowledge, for if a scene's technique is badly imagined by

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<sup>51</sup> No page number provided in web document.

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the artist, this technique will also be badly executed, and will serve no practical purpose. In so doing, the artist effectively separates technique and ideal once again. Technique that is not integrated into the virtual reality painting will only manifest itself once the creation of the physical painting begins, and this will produce inferior art. Diderot's intention in fusing technique and ideal has been to demonstrate that superior art can only exist where technique is intellectualised, forms part of the artist's planning process and thus becomes one with ideal. Technique and ideal no longer have a "relationship" : they are, effectively, the same thing.

According to Lojkine, the *Salon de 1767* is devoted to decisively putting in place the idea of technique and ideal as a single concept, with a painting's layout taking the place normally occupied by technique in that painting's execution. This new concept also plays an integral role in Diderot's treatment in this *Salon*, of one of his many great passions : the disproving of *ut pictura poesis*.

Diderot's condemnation of *ut pictura poesis* in this *Salon* begins with the philosopher's reflections on Le Prince's illustrations of Saint Lambert's poem on the subject of the seasons:

Il y a peu d'hommes, même parmi les gens de lettres, qui sachent ordonner un tableau. Demandez à Le Prince, chargé par Monsieur de Saint Lambert, homme d'esprit, certes s'il en fut, de la composition des figures qui doivent décorer son poème des Saisons. C'est une foule d'idées fines qui ne peuvent se rendre, ou qui rendues seraient sans effet. Ce sont des demandes ou folles ou ridicules, ou incompatibles avec la beauté du technique. Cela serait passable, écrit ; détestable, peint ; et c'est ce que mes confrères ne sentent pas. Ils ont dans la tête "Ut pictura poesis erit" ; et ils ne se doutent pas qu'il est encore plus vrai qu'ut poesis, pictura non erit. Ce qui fait bien en peinture, fait toujours bien en poésie, mais cela n'est pas réciproque (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XVI : 150 in Lojkine 2009)<sup>53</sup>.

Lojkine draws attention to the uniqueness of Diderot's declaration of "ut poesis, pictura non erit". It defies convention, first by comparing literature to painting rather than painting to literature, second by presenting painting as an art form that may exist independently of literature. In the eighteenth century, this last point was a thing unheard of. *Ut pictura poesis*, a concept whereby what may be depicted in painting may be depicted in literature and vice versa, had been known to work to the detriment of painting despite its pretences of promoting

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<sup>53</sup> No page number provided in web document.

equality between the two art forms ; this because the grand culture of history painting depended for its very existence on historical or mythological events recounted by classical writers. By declaring “ut poesis, pictura non erit”, Diderot is detaching painting from its traditional obligation to literature and making painting exist for itself and of itself alone. Painting is being pulled from the realm of the literary into the realm of the pure visual, into what Lojkin calls a *régime de visibilité* (Lojkin 2009)<sup>54</sup>.

How does this “detaching” of painting from literature impact on Diderot’s ideas regarding technique as an integral part of ideal rather than of the actual execution of a painting? Lojkin states that while this form of ideal remains the major basis of artistic creation for Diderot, this changes if the *régime de visibilité* becomes the primary way of telling a particular painting’s story. If an artist comes to privilege the visual rather than the literary, his inspiration does not lie in the words of the literary text, but in the mental representation the words create in his mind. A painter no longer works from words, but from vision. He transitions from the words on the page to the virtual reality painting in his mind. Technique is what ultimately pushes the ideal of a painting away from literature, and towards the painter’s vision of his subject ; asserting its own significance through the role it plays in determining the layout of the painting; a layout that has come not from literature, but from the artist’s own imagining of a subject.

The significance of the *Salon de 1767* in terms of Diderot’s development of a theory of the relationship between technique and ideal lies in the fact that it is in this *Salon* that the interdependence of the two concepts reaches its apogee. It is also in this *Salon* that the “couple technique-idéal” (Lojkin 2009)<sup>55</sup> proves its significance in demonstrating the central role it plays in Diderot’s attempt to disprove the popular aesthetic theory of *ut pictura poesis*.

In his study, Lojkin has demonstrated that the relationship between technique and ideal, and their potential interdependence, is an important question in the full understanding of Diderot’s *Salons* and that it is worthy of study. This is particularly true in the manner in which the study presents the two concepts as merging in the two larger and more significant *Salon de 1765* and the *Salon de 1767*. While the notion of technique and ideal becoming one and the same is an extraordinary concept in terms of demonstrating the sheer complexity of Diderot’s thought, it is necessary to establish whether this idea can be universally applied to

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<sup>54</sup> No page number provided in web document.

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Diderot's critiques in these two *Salons*, or whether it is only evident in those paintings analysed by Lojkine. As stated above, Diderot was a highly emotional and contrary individual who, despite the strides he makes in the *Salon de 1765* and the *Salon de 1767* towards responding objectively to paintings, never quite manages to achieve objectivity, or the consistency that comes with it. It is therefore necessary, we believe, to investigate if the interchangeability of technique and ideal as advanced by Lojkine, namely the interchangeability of technique and ideal and the predominance of the virtual reality painting, can be applied universally in the *Salon de 1765* and the *Salon de 1767*, or whether they may only be applied to certain paintings<sup>56</sup>.

### 2.3.2 Conclusion

In this review of the literature pertaining to Diderot as an art critic, it has been demonstrated that the relationship between technique and ideal is a developing one in Diderot's art criticism. In the early *Salons* of 1759, 1761 and 1763, the interdependence of technique and ideal is recognised but scholarship has only alluded to it or mentioned it briefly, without development. However, in the later *Salons* of 1765 and 1767, Diderot's acknowledgment of the contribution made by the methods of art to the production of paintings that move the heart and stimulate the imagination, leads the "couple technique-idéal" (Lojkine 2009)<sup>57</sup> to assume a new significance as "l'opposition de base pour penser et pour évaluer le processus de la création artistique", "le concept opératoire fondamental pour penser une poétique de la peinture" and "les deux critères exclusifs du jugement de l'œuvre" (Lojkine 2009)<sup>58</sup>. In addition to revealing the importance of the "couple technique-idéal" to Diderot's art criticism, the literature review has also established how this "couple" has been underrepresented in important literature on Diderot's general aesthetic and in significant studies dealing with specific aspects of this aesthetic.

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<sup>56</sup> Lojkine analyses extracts from Diderot's art criticism of the following paintings : Parocel's *Adoration des rois*, Boucher's *Angélique Médor*, Van Loo's *Les Grâces enchaînées par l'amour*, Deshayes' *Chasteté de Joséphe*, Fragonard's *Le grand prêtre Coréus s'immole pour sauver Callirhoé*, Casanove's *Une Marche d'Armée*, Vien's *Mars et Vénus* and Baudouin's *Le Modèle Honnête*.

<sup>57</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>58</sup> No page number provided in web document.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SALONS DE 1759, 1761, 1763

#### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, it was observed that Diderot's first *Salon*, the *Salon de 1759*, was born from a request from his best friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm, editor of the *Correspondance Littéraire*. This request is outlined by Grimm himself at the beginning of that particular *Salon*:

Après tous les éloges prodigués par nos journalistes sans goût et sans jugement, aux tableaux exposés cette année par l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, vous ne serez pas fâché de vous former une idée moins vague et plus juste de cette exposition. Ce que vous allez lire s'adresse à moi, et vous fera sans doute plus de plaisir que tout ce que j'aurais pu écrire à ce sujet (Assézat X : 91).

The purpose of the first *Salon* is therefore clear : to provide readers with an appraisal of the *Académie Royale*'s biennial art exhibition, written by *un homme de goût* capable of offering readers a fairer and more precise judgement of the *Salon* than what was commonly available. Diderot himself relished the opportunity to simultaneously help his friend, and to punish what he considered to be artists' inferior translations of classical literary works onto canvas (Starobinski 1991 in Sez nec 2007 : 219). It should be noted, however, that despite the enthusiasm with which Diderot undertook such chastisement, the early *Salons* (i.e. 1759, 1761 and 1763) were written in the context of Diderot's slow, but gradual attainment of the artistic knowledge that he lacked. Between 1759 and 1763, Diderot was still finding his feet in terms of his role as an art critic ; often confining himself to descriptions of the emotions that certain paintings inspired or provoked in him. He conducted his art criticism in this manner because he did not possess the necessary knowledge to make much significant comment about the tools employed by artists in the creation of their work (Bukhdal 1980 : 351). It was only once he had begun to regularly attend the *Académie Royale*'s biennial exhibitions that he was to commence many of his celebrated associations with artists in order to learn from them (Wilson 1972 : 423) and to wed the artistic knowledge he acquired to his own imaginative prowess. Diderot's recognition of this dynamic between an artist's ability to capture the imagination and the methods he employs to do so was to become the basic criteria



for all of Diderot's art criticism. Though this dynamic is much subtler in the early *Salons* than in the later *Salons*, it is possible to observe in them the gradual development of Diderot's naturally meticulous artistic eye that was to become significantly more refined and analytical in the later *Salons*.

It is in the context of this gradual attainment of technical knowledge that the three early *Salons* are truly important and act as preludes to the great *Salons* of 1765 and 1767, with their vast reflections on artistic technique and the transfiguration of paintings into wild dreamscapes that the reader could step into and walk around in.

This chapter will comprise three parts, each devoted to the *Salons* of 1759, 1761 and 1763 respectively. In our investigation of each *Salon*, we will endeavour to identify, in the texts of these *Salons*, Diderot's treatment of artists' ability to capture the imagination and the methods they employ to do so. We will also attempt to establish whether the notion of the interrelatedness of these two concepts – the imagination and the methods employed to create it – is something that occurs to Diderot at this early stage (i.e. the *Salons* of 1759, 1761 and 1763), and, if so, whether Diderot acknowledges this interrelatedness, and if so, in what manner.

### 3.2 *Salon de 1759*

“Voici à peu près ce que vous m’avez demandé. Je souhaite que vous puissiez en tirer parti” writes Diderot to Grimm at the beginning of the *Salon de 1759* ; words that provide very little towards a definition of the *Salon de 1759* in terms of literary genre. The *Salon* is described as “à peu près<sup>59</sup> ce que vous m’avez demandé” ; thus suggesting an awareness on Diderot's part that the text he is offering Grimm is only an approximation of what one might call the art criticism that he has been called upon to write. Furthermore, the words “je souhaite que vous puissiez en tirer parti”, particularly the use of the verb “pouvoir” in the approximative mode, the subjunctive, convey Diderot's anxiety that Grimm, for whatever reason, may not be able to use this text in the *Correspondance Littéraire*. The employment of the subjunctive mode also serves to express Diderot's hope that his reflections on the *Salon de 1759* may nevertheless prove useful to Grimm in some way. Perhaps this lack of precision in defining what the *Salon* is meant to be, or what purpose it may serve is understandable : 1759 was a challenging year for Diderot, entailing both the suppression of the *Encyclopédie* and a definitive end to his long-time friendship with Rousseau, and one may assume that he would

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<sup>59</sup> Our emphasis.

have had little inclination for painstaking precision. This same inability, or unwillingness, to be precise about the origins of his likes and dislikes pervades Diderot's *Salon de 1759*, a work that is "modeste dans ses proportions comme dans son ambition" (Belleguic 2007 : 5). It is Diderot's first *Salon*, and his knowledge of the methods employed by artists to create such works as were exhibited at the *Salon* is less detailed than it was to become in future years. In fact, Diderot's actual comments on the technical aspects of art as opposed to those related to ideal, or the ability to capture a viewer's imagination and feeling, are so minimal that devoting a separate section of this chapter to them would be a purposeless exercise. Ideal dominates in the *Salon de 1759* to the detriment of technique, with Diderot's treatment of the former being so widespread that most of his references to technique occur in the context of discussions about ideal, and very few, if any, occur independently of it. The reason for this discrimination is that an emotional and creative approach to painting must have seemed both natural and logical to an educated man of imagination engaging with a form of art that he knew nothing about (Chouillet 1973 : 562). Diderot does, however, make passing references to artistic practice in his discussions of the emotional effects of art on the viewer that seem to suggest at least an unconscious recognition of the interrelatedness of the two concepts in the creation of great art. While this conviction on Diderot's part is not yet prevalent enough for him to construct anything resembling a methodology from it, it is present nonetheless and, while minimal, is significant enough to merit a full examination in this chapter.

In the light of the overshadowing of technique by ideal in the *Salon de 1759*, our study of this particular *Salon* will adopt the following structure. We will not, as we will in Chapters 4 and 5, devote separate sections of this chapter to Diderot's portrayal of technique and ideal as autonomous concepts, before proceeding to an investigation of their possible interdependence. Diderot's remarks on technique in this *Salon* are far too sparse to merit this. Instead, we will first examine Diderot's critique of Jaurat's *Chatreux en méditation* and Bachelier's *Résurrection* in order to accurately demonstrate the manner in which ideal eclipses technique in this *Salon*. We will then explore Diderot's analyses of La Grenée's *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils* and Carle Van Loo's *Jason et Médée*, both of which make reference to the methods and to the imaginative aspect of art. The aim of our examination of these two analyses is to ascertain whether Diderot, at this point in time, consciously or unconsciously believes in the interdependence or the autonomy of technique and ideal in producing a great work of art.

In the *Salon de 1759*, Diderot's observations on ideal show a great preoccupation with the emotion that a painting should inspire, the imagination that it should capture, and the achievement of these two things through *la vraisemblance* ; the painting of the truth. This notion of *la vraisemblance* was an important one in eighteenth-century painting, and before we are able to comment on Diderot's opinions on the link between superior ideal and the role of *la vraisemblance* in painting, we must first understand the meaning of this term.

The meaning of *la vraisemblance* is tied up with the eighteenth-century view of painting, which is exemplified by the famous definition of the painter and art critic de Piles : "L'essence et la définition de la peinture est l'imitation des objets visibles par le moyen de la forme et des couleurs" (de Piles 1708 : 3 in Lavezzi 2007 : 14). Painting was therefore considered to be an art of imitation, with "imitation" traditionally taken to mean the production of a copy of reality so perfect that the viewer is unable to tell the difference between the painting of an object and an object itself. The origin of de Pile's definition is the popularity of those sections of Pliny's *Natural History* that recount the genesis of painting ; one of the most enduring being the story Pliny tells of Zeuxis and Parrhasius in Book XXXV, Section 36. According to this anecdote, the painter Parrhasius challenged his rival, Zeuxis, to a contest in order to determine which of them was the greater artist. On the day on which they were to unveil their respective works, Zeuxis' painting of a bushel of grapes proved so lifelike that it was descended on and pecked at by birds who believed the grapes to be real. Parrhasius, whose work was concealed behind a curtain, asked his rival to oblige him by pulling the curtain aside. When the curtain itself was revealed to be not a piece of fabric, but Parrhasius' painting, Zeuxis modestly declared the superiority of his rival's work ; Zeuxis having only succeeded in deceiving birds, Parrhasius having succeeded in deceiving an artist (Lavezzi 2007 : 15).

While Pliny's intention in recounting this story is not to provide a definition of painting, but to highlight the ease with which an object and a representation of that same object may be confused, it is difficult to take the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius seriously ; nor was it taken seriously, in Diderot's time, by those who possessed the appropriate artistic knowledge (Lavezzi 2007 : 15). The great sculptor Falconet, for instance, translated and wrote a commentary on Pliny's *Natural History* (1783) and declared that : "pour que Parrhasius eût dit ce qu'on lui fait dire ici, on aurait fallu qu'il eût eu peu de talent, peu de jugement et peu de connaissance de son art" (XXXV, Section 36 : 288 in Lavezzi 2007 : 16). In the light of

Parrhasius' victory over Zeuxis, this remark seems rather uncharitable, until it is taken in concert with the remarks made by the art critic Cochin in his *L'illusion en peinture* (1771) ; remarks that accurately capture the mind-set of the eighteenth-century artist on the subject of illusion. Cochin claims that the ability to produce an illusion, that is, a copy so perfect as to impersonate reality, can only be achieved under questionable conditions. For instance, objects of art that are of a fundamentally thin nature, such as mouldings or bass reliefs, may easily fool a viewer, but thicker objects will not deceive quite as easily. Cochin further claims that the effectiveness of an illusion also depends largely on where the viewer is standing : a viewer placed at a distance from an illusion will easily be fooled by it, whereas a viewer that directly faces an illusion will immediately recognise it as such (Lavezzi 2007 : 16). Therefore, Falconet's criticism of Parrhasius as a painter of little judgment, talent or knowledge is in fact, when taken together with Cochin's remarks on illusion, a condemnation of the view that to produce a convincing illusion, or perfect copy, is the same thing as producing a good painting. Falconet's negative opinion of Parrhasius demonstrates that while the notion of a painting being an exact copy of reality was a popular one in the eighteenth century, it was by no means a popular opinion among those with a working knowledge of painting. Such people knew very well that a painting was not and could never be a perfect copy of the thing it represented (Lavezzi 2007 : 16-17), for painting was an art of imitation rather than copying, with imitation being by far the superior of the two. The prominent eighteenth-century historian and art theorist, the Abbé Du Bos, speaks of this distinction in his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* and observes that in painting, the artist must "savoir copier la nature sans la voir" (1719 : 221-222 in Lavezzi 2007 : 18). The artist must simultaneously copy the model in front of him and imagine the appearance of the figure or character he is painting : "On voit bien le sujet que la passion doit animer, mais on ne le voit point dans l'état où la passion doit le réduire, et c'est dans cet état qu'il le faut peindre" (Du Bos 1719 : 221-222 in Lavezzi 2007 : 18). De Piles claims that when the artist paints from nature, he sees before him the model, or the mortal flesh that his brush must bring to life. He does not, however, see the figure as it must appear on his canvas, burning with every emotion that the artist must convey in the painting. He can only see that in his mind's eye. The artist observes nature, but while painting nature, he must paint more than he observes, and therefore more than nature. According to de Piles :

(...) tantôt il diminue la vivacité du naturel, et tantôt il enchérit sur l'éclat et sur la force des couleurs qu'il y trouve, afin d'exprimer plus vivement et plus véritablement le caractère de

son objet sans l'altérer. Il n'y a que les grands peintres et en très petit nombre qui aient pénétré dans l'intelligence de cet artifice. Ainsi, bien loin que cette savante exagération énerve la fidélité de l'imitation, au contraire elle sert au peintre pour jeter plus de vérité en ce qu'il imite d'après nature (1708 : 308-309 in Lavezzi 2007 : 19).

De Piles therefore believes that in order for a painting to preserve the character and spirit of its subject matter, the artist must enter into "the intelligence of artifice". He must assure the unity and harmony of the painting by adding truth to what he draws from nature : he must, in effect, paint the truth in a manner that is truer than the truth. In eighteenth-century painting, this notion of painting "the truth" is called *la vraisemblance* and is divided into two categories by the Abbé Du Bos : "la vraisemblance mécanique" and "la vraisemblance poétique". The former is the painting of nature without seeking to alter it. The latter adds to the truth that the painter observes in nature in that all the customs, costumes, temperament and setting of the painting are consistent with the truth, but that the painting's figures reflect the truth portrayed in the painting rather than the truth observed by the painter in nature. This must be accomplished through the imagination, or through the tireless observation of portrait paintings :

La vraisemblance poétique consiste enfin à donner aux personnages d'un tableau leur tête et leur caractère connu, quand ils en ont un, soit que ce caractère ait été pris sur les portraits, soit qu'il ait été imaginé (Dubos 1719 in Lavezzi 2007 : 19).

The concept of *la vraisemblance*, first *mécanique*, then *poétique*, appealed strongly to Diderot throughout all his *Salons*. *La vraisemblance* is at the heart of his famous dislike of Boucher, whose paintings he accused of presenting a version of reality intolerably saturated in sweetness, sensuality and excess. *La vraisemblance* is also the fundamental reason for Diderot's love of Chardin, before whose still-life paintings the philosopher claims to have stretched out his hands to pluck out the fruits represented in them. In the *Salon de 1759*, Diderot does not associate an artist's ability to paint with *vraisemblance* with any particular artistic technique. Rather, he associates it with ideal, that is, with the ability to produce good content in a painting and to have the imagination to do so. Diderot's association of *vraisemblance* with ideal was to change as his knowledge of the importance of technique increased. In the *Salon de 1759*, however, Diderot keeps *vraisemblance* firmly in the domain of ideal.

### 3.2.1 Jeaurat : *Chartreux en méditation*<sup>60</sup>

Diderot's short analysis of Jeaurat's *Chartreux en méditation* refers almost entirely to the painting's lack of *vraisemblance*, and this, on the most basic level :

Point de silence, rien de sauvage, rien qui rappelle la justice divine, nulle idée, nulle adoration profonde, nul recueillement intérieur, point de terreur, point d'extase ; cet homme ne s'est pas douté de cela. Si son génie ne lui disait rien, que n'allait-il aux Chartreux ? il aurait vu là ce qu'il n'imaginait pas. Mais croyez-vous qu'il l'eût vu ? S'il y a peu de gens qui sachent regarder un tableau, y a-t-il bien des peintres qui sachent regarder la nature (Assézat X : 94) ?

Diderot's first step in this analysis is to assail the reader with negatives : “*point de silence, rien de sauvage, rien qui rappelle la justice divine, nulle idée, nulle adoration profonde, nul recueillement intérieur, point de terreur, point d'extase*”<sup>61</sup>. The accumulative effect of all these negatives (eleven in four lines) is to highlight the painting's failure to draw the viewer into its universe with powerful emotions such as ecstasy, terror and religious fervour, as well as to amplify the gaping void created at the heart of the painting's ideal by its persistent lack of expression and poignancy. It should also be noted that this negative-laden first sentence is a *phrase nominale* and does not possess a verb. This removes all sense of action, life, and above all, movement from the sentence and consequently from the painting. The figures, expressionless and lifeless, seem frozen by their own dullness. If one considers that Diderot, especially in later *Salons*, often created his most masterful analyses by bringing to life through literary technique and imagination the paintings that pleased him best, the lack of verbs in this sentence, together with the lack of movement in the painting implied by it, suggests a dullness so profound that Diderot cannot even trouble himself to suggest ways in which this might be corrected beyond the suggestion, contained in the rhetorical questions that follow, that Jeaurat simply open his eyes to observe the world.

The three rhetorical questions that follow Diderot's storm of negatives, serve to further emphasise the philosopher's displeasure with *Chartreux en méditation*. The philosopher asks why Jeaurat, if his genius told him nothing of the life of the Chartreux monks, did not simply go to see them in order to observe what he could not imagine. In the second rhetorical question, Diderot casts doubt on the possibility of such a visit having much effect on a man of

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<sup>60</sup> See Appendix 3 (page 194) for full text of article.

<sup>61</sup> Our emphasis.

such poor imagination before asking, in the third, if there are many painters who know how to truly observe nature, as there exist so few human beings who know the correct way to look at a painting. With these questions, Diderot creates a second accumulative effect directly after that which he has created with the negatives, thereby sweeping the reader up into his despair and annoyance at the painting's failure to inspire emotion. Diderot goes on to suggest that if Jeurat is incapable of understanding, portraying or soliciting such profound concepts as "silence (...), sauvage (...), justice (...), divine (...), adoration (...), terreur (...), extase" within himself, he should go and seek them out : "Si son génie ne lui disait rien, que n'allait-il aux Chartreux ? il aurait vu là ce qu'il n'imaginait pas". This statement is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, because of its somewhat typical *cruauté diderotienne*<sup>62</sup> in stating that Jeurat has no genius whatsoever. Secondly, the suggestion that Jeurat go to the Chartreux and let his eyes do what his imagination has failed to do ; a suggestion that creates a strong link between the sentiments a painting inspires and the truth that it depicts. Diderot's proposal to Jeurat refers to the *vraisemblance mécanique* that dominates in Diderot's early *Salons* : if an artist does not possess the strong imagination required to create his own version of the truth, the content of his paintings must demonstrate the artist's ability to copy rather than to imagine nature. Content, imagination and emotion falling squarely within the domain of ideal, it is to ideal that Diderot refers when he laments Jeurat's lack of imagination and inability to move the viewer.

### 3.2.2 Bachelier : *Résurrection*<sup>63</sup>

Diderot rarely has anything good to say about Bachelier ; the origins of his disdain being the nature of Bachelier's speciality, that is, still life with flowers, and the person of Bachelier's father-in-law, Boucher, the illustrious *peintre du roi* of whom Diderot would prove to be an ever-willing nemesis<sup>64</sup>. In the *Salon de 1759*, Diderot's comments on Bachelier, while cruel, do tell us a great deal about Diderot's belief in the importance of *la vraisemblance mécanique* in a great work of art :

Bachelier a fait une grande et mauvaise Résurrection, à la manière de peindre du comte de Caylus. Monsieur Bachelier, croyez-moi, revenez à vos tulipes ; il n'y a ni couleur, ni composition, ni expression, ni dessin dans votre tableau. Ce Christ est tout disloqué; c'est un patient dont les membres ont été mal reboutés.

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<sup>62</sup> Our expression.

<sup>63</sup> See Appendix 3 (page 195) for full text of article.

<sup>64</sup> Boucher was despised by Diderot for what the philosopher called his inability to accurately imitate nature, or to encourage the practice of good morals through his painting (Duflot 2000 : 98).

De la manière dont vous avez ouvert ce tombeau, c'est vraiment un miracle qu'il en soit sorti, et, si on le faisait parler d'après son geste, il dirait aux spectateurs : "Adieu, messieurs, je suis votre serviteur, il ne fait pas bon parmi vous et je m'en vais". Tous ces chercheurs de méthodes nouvelles n'ont point de génie (Assézat X : 99).

Diderot's choosing to begin his critique of the *Résurrection* with advice to Bachelier to return to still life with flowers does not bode well for the rest of the analysis. While Diderot is briefly critical, in the above quotation, of certain technical elements in the *Résurrection*, colour and form being among them, it is Bachelier's "expression" that Diderot attacks the most in his analysis of this painting. He begins by condemning the way that Bachelier has represented the human form in the person of Christ. Christ is represented as a patient of some kind whose dislocated bones have been amateurishly pushed back into their true positions. Diderot's disapproval of the rendering of the Christ figure is an appeal to *la vraisemblance mécanique*, that is, to the accurate representation of the subject matter and of the human form. The Resurrection is meant to inspire great emotion in Christians – awe, hope, joy – and Bachelier's representation of Christ fails to achieve this by virtue of its poor sense of *vraisemblance*. Diderot emphasises Bachelier's inability to inspire awe by making use both of a tone and of a syntactical construction that are drawn from colloquial rather than formal French. The demonstrative adjective in "ce Christ", followed by the declaration that "c'est un patient" are drawn directly from everyday language, as are the expressions "ce Christ est tout disloqué" and "mal reboutés". This informal language is intended to emphasise the familiarity and banality of Bachelier's painting of the Resurrection and the degree to which it does not merit serious consideration. A sublime painting would have been described in sublime language. Instead, Bachelier's poor sense of *la vraisemblance mécanique* has led him to make a ridiculous painting from sublime subject matter. Diderot's conviction in this ridiculousness extends to his comments on the representation of the tomb, which is so poorly drawn that the miracle the painting depicts is not so much Jesus rising from the dead as Jesus rising from an inescapable tomb. The same trivialising of the subject matter holds true in Jesus' gesture to his disciples, which, rather than seeming to indicate the imminent passing of religious wisdom, seems instead to make him say "Adieu, messieurs, je suis votre serviteur, il ne fait pas bon parmi vous et je m'en vais". The further use of a flippant tone and banal day-to-day language, reinforces the inconsequence of the painting and of the sentiments inspired by it. Had Bachelier possessed a good imagination, and the ability to portray the emotions that his imagining of such emotional subject matter required, the content of his painting



would have been different. However, since he lacks both imagination and emotion, he has failed to grasp the importance of ideal and has created a ridiculous work of art that might, under different conditions, have been sublime.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the *Salon de 1759* is a work of art criticism written at a time when Diderot's knowledge of art was at its most basic. He was a novice in art criticism and had only a rudimentary knowledge of aesthetics. It is unlikely, then, that he would make a *conscious* connection between the tools an artist uses to create a particular work of art and the manner in which that same work of art succeeded or failed in inspiring the viewer's imagination. To make such a connection consciously would require a knowledge of artistic technique and aesthetics that Diderot does not possess at this chronological juncture. However, for a sensitive and educated man with a good eye for art, it is not impossible for such a connection to be made unconsciously. This part of the chapter on the *Salon de 1759* will attempt to ascertain whether or not Diderot makes any kind of connection, whether conscious or instinctive, between the technique used by an artist, and his ideal. This examination will be conducted through an analysis of Diderot's critique of La Grenée's *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils* and Carle Van Loo's *Jason et Médée*. In each analysis, we will first observe Diderot's discussion of ideal, before identifying examples that might demonstrate an instinct for the important role played by the interdependence of technique and ideal in the production of art.

### **3.2.3 La Grenée : *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils*<sup>65</sup>**

The essence of Diderot's analysis of La Grenée lies in something that Diderot was to do many times in future *Salons*. He imagines the painting as he would have painted it, full of *pathos*, inspiration and imagination drawn from his skill as a *homme de lettres*, before comparing his imaginings with the (usually inadequate) way that the artist has painted it. He constructs, as it were, a virtual reality painting. Here is Diderot's imagining of how he, as an artist, would have portrayed *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils* :

Si j'avais eu à peindre la descente de Vénus dans les forges de Lemnos, on aurait vu les forges en feu sous des masses de roches, Vulcain debout devant son enclume, les mains appuyées sur son marteau, la déesse toute nue lui passant la main sous le menton ; ici le travail des Cyclopes suspendu, quelques-uns regardant leur

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<sup>65</sup> See Appendix 3 (page 195) for full text of article.

maître que sa femme séduit, et souriant ironiquement ; d'autres, cependant, auraient fait étinceler le fer embrasé ; les étincelles dispersées sous leurs coups auraient écarté les Amours dans un coin, ces enfants turbulents auraient mis en désordre l'atelier du forgeron. Et qui aurait empêché qu'un des Cyclopes n'en eût saisi un par les ailes pour le baiser ? Le sujet était de poésie et d'imagination, et j'aurais tâché d'en montrer (Assézat X : 96).

Diderot considers the scene that he has conjured up to be infinitely superior to La Grenée's. A principal reason for this is that every figure in Diderot's reimagining has a place and a purpose. The nude figure of Venus is in the act of seducing Vulcan in the hope that it will make him provide weapons for her son, lifting his chin while the Cyclops watch, amused. Diderot solves the painting's spatial problems by imagining other Cyclops present who are not so intrigued by the sight of Venus' seduction of their master and who continue to keep the fire alive. He also imagines *les Amours*, the cupids that traditionally accompany Venus, causing chaos in the forge. The sparks that fly from the fires eventually drive the cupids into a corner, where one of them is seized and kissed by an enterprising Cyclops. This is a charming idea of what might happen if a group of Cupids invaded Vulcan's forge while attending their mistress Venus, and is a valid way to avoid the problem of empty spaces in the painting. The position of each figure being an important aspect of a painting that is grounded in a good imagining of the subject matter, Diderot is not wrong when he declares "Le sujet était de poésie et d'imagination, et j'aurais tâché d'en montrer".

La Grenée's painting, however, does not seem to display either poetry or imagination :

Au lieu de cela, c'est une grande toile nue où quelques figures oisives et muettes se perdent. On ne regarde ni Vulcain, ni la déesse. Je ne sais s'il y a des Cyclopes. La seule figure qu'on remarque, c'est un homme placé sur le devant qui soulève une poutre ferrée par le bout... (Assézat X : 96-97).

Diderot describes La Grenée's painting as "une grande toile nue", the implication being that it is so uninteresting that it seems completely bare and empty. There are only a few figures, none of which communicate their emotions to the viewer either by their appearance or by their actions : they are "oisives et muettes". The layout of the painting is such that these mute figures seem to lose themselves in the large tracts of empty canvas that they do not occupy. The unfortunate effect of this is that the viewer does not look at the two principal figures at all and, at best, is in doubt as to the presence of secondary figures. At worst, he is left indifferent, and his emotions are untouched. According to Diderot, the only figure that the

audience *does* bother to look at is a male figure in the painting's foreground, engaged in lifting an iron girder by its tip. Since we are given no clue as to this man's identity or apparent purpose, his being present at all is a clear mistake on the part of the artist in terms of ensuring the painting's focal point. Instead of our attention being concentrated on the most important figures – Venus and Vulcan – it is concentrated on a figure that has no discernible role to play. This painting as a whole is therefore plagued by two significant problems. The first, and most notable, is its content : the figures are present in body, but in precious little else, which damages the painting's ideal. While this faulty ideal is important, La Grenée has also demonstrated a poor knowledge of layout ; a problem that is technical in nature. The reader of this critique must determine whether this faulty ideal is caused by faulty technique, and whether the one might have improved the other.

La Grenée's poor command of spatial elements certainly has an effect on his painting's ideal, for the viewer, in contemplating the painting's emptiness, is distracted from everything else : he is too busy looking to feel anything. Technique therefore impacts on ideal here, as the painting's layout impedes an emotional response to the painting. Diderot, himself, does not seem to realise at all that he has made this connection between technique and ideal : he mentions the nakedness of the painting, the emotionless and uninspiring figures that lose themselves in the empty space and the curious, unidentified man in the foreground, before adding an ellipsis and proceeding directly to his analysis of the *Jugement de Paris*. In total, his analysis, together with its implied link between technique and ideal, only comprises five lines. While Diderot's critique of this painting only constitutes a small beginning, and the connection made between technique and ideal would seem to be an unconscious one, Diderot's critique of La Grenée's *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils* demonstrates that the link between technique and ideal does indeed exist on a certain level in Diderot's mind.

### 3.2.4 Carle Van Loo : *Jason et Médée*<sup>66</sup>

Diderot's criticism of Carle Van Loo's *Jason et Médée* is grounded in Van Loo's failure to paint in a way that is consistent with the principles of *la vraisemblance mécanique*. In the context of both the tools of the artist and of the painting's content, spirit, and imitation of reality, Van Loo is accused of a supreme artificiality that renders potentially pathetic subject matter ridiculous :

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<sup>66</sup> See Appendix 3 (page 196) for full text of article.

Enfin nous l'avons vu, ce tableau fameux de *Jason et Médée*, par Carle Van Loo. Ô mon ami, la mauvaise chose ! C'est une décoration théâtrale avec toute sa fausseté ; un faste de couleur qu'on ne peut supporter ; un Jason d'une bêtise inconcevable. L'imbécile tire son épée contre une magicienne qui s'envole dans les airs, qui est hors de sa portée, et qui laisse à ses pieds ses enfants égorgés. C'est bien cela ! Il fallait lever au ciel des bras désespérés, avoir la tête renversée en arrière ; les cheveux hérissés ! une bouche ouverte qui poussât de longs cris, des yeux égarés... Et puis, une petite Médée, courte, raide, engoncée, surchargée d'étoffes ; une Médée de coulisses ; pas une goutte de sang qui tombe de la pointe de son poignard et qui coule sur ses bras ; point de désordre, point de terreur. On regarde, on est ébloui et on reste froid. La draperie qui touche au corps a le mat et les reflets d'une cuirasse ; on dirait d'une plaque de cuivre jaune. Il y a sur le devant un très-bel enfant renversé sur les degrés arrosés de son sang ; mais il est sans effet. Ce peintre ne pense ni ne sent : un char d'une pesanteur énorme ! Si ce tableau était un morceau de tapisserie, il faudrait accorder une pension au teinturier (Assézat X : 93).

Diderot presents *Jason et Médée* as a piece of bad theatre that poorly conveys reality and that exists in sharp contrast to the *vraisemblance mécanique* that Diderot sees as the epitome of artistic accomplishment at this chronological juncture. In his analysis of *Jason et Médée*, the philosopher uses theatrical imagery and stage directions to express his disdain for the painting and to suggest improvements. Diderot does not merely do this to create a clever extended metaphor about the painting's deficient theatrical elements, but because theatre was an artistic medium that he was deeply interested in. Two years previously, Diderot had written his play *Le fils naturel*, as well as its accompanying treatise *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, which put forward the conception of a new theatrical genre, the *tragédie domestique et bourgeoise*. This new genre proposed the abandonment of the norms created by seventeenth century tragedy and the creation of a new theatre that demonstrated the noble sentiments in ordinary people and that served the didactic purpose of educating society in moral behaviour. Diderot was to make use of his knowledge of the theatre in greater detail in the *Salon de 1761*, notably in his analysis of Greuze's *L'Accordée du Village*<sup>67</sup>. In *Jason et Médée*, however, Diderot's interest in the theatre is clear, though not applied on so great a scale as it would be in 1761. The painting is simply presented as though it were a very bad

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<sup>67</sup> See page 79 for a detailed analysis of this painting.

play, perhaps even a pantomime (Démoris 2007 in ed. Gaillard 2007 : 27) that the philosopher, with his knowledge of everything that he believes to be good in theatre, may use to correct the manifestation of everything that he believes to be bad. In our analysis, we will look at Diderot's use of theatrical imagery and of stage directions to propose a better version of this painting.

Diderot employs metaphor when describing the theatrical artificiality of the figure of Medea ; describing her as “une decoration théâtrale avec toute sa fausseté” and “une Médée des coulisses”. This figure is the physical incarnation of the necessary un-reality of theatre, conveyed in the worst possible way. As “une Médée des coulisses”, Medea appears as the character does in the wings of the theatre, before she is permitted on stage ; Medea as she looks before she is animated and brought to life by an actress, with no madness in her eyes or blood on her hands. Diderot's use of this theatrical imagery in his description of the figure of Medea is important, as it emphasises the inherent artificiality of theatre. When one attends live theatre, one is aware that the trees are painted and that the Medea in the play is an actress, however, it is the strength or weakness of the performance that allows one to suspend disbelief or else to remain detached. Van Loo's Medea is like a bad stage production of the Greek myth, so artificial and so lacking in any kind of ability to capture the imagination, that the audience is unable to see the figure of Medea as anything other than an actress in a costume.

In his analysis of *Jason et Médée*, Diderot also makes use of what are in effect, stage directions. These are employed in a theatre environment to ensure that each actor is positioned in the correct place, at the correct time, pronounces his lines in the required tone and accompanies these lines with the appropriate gestures required by the script. Stage directions are also vital in ensuring that the correct *mise-en-scène* has been applied for each separate scene. The purpose of the “stage directions” given by the philosopher in his critique of *Jason et Médée* is to describe how the scene should have been painted. Upon looking at the painting, or indeed the scene, Diderot presents the viewer as being faced with a Jason of doubtful intelligence drawing his sword against a flying magician (Medea) who has left his dead children at his feet. In his re-imagining of the painting, Diderot claims that Jason should “lever au ciel des bras désespérés”, have “la tête renversée en arrière”, “les cheveux hérissés”, “une bouche ouverte”, “des yeux égarés”. These gestural instructions and proposed facial movements use the language of theatre to critique a painting and carry Diderot's

criticism through the medium of theatre. They also demonstrate the importance of the accurate portrayal of emotions in a painting. Just as a playwright would ensure the correct representation of emotion by writing the required gestures and expressions into the play's script, Diderot is here suggesting the addition of theatrical qualities to *Jason et Médée* that would accurately convey the passions experienced by the characters, and thus improve the painting's ideal.

Diderot's secondary purpose in using stage directions in his analysis is to achieve emphasis through contrast. Diderot places the directions which illustrate his powerful reimagining of the scene directly between his remarks on the painting's unbearable colour and his claims that Medea is a magician and Jason an imbecile. In so doing, Diderot contrasts the majesty of what the painting could have been with the vulgarity of what it is : he contrasts the possibility of sublime ideal with the reality of poor ideal.

Diderot's principal criticism regarding Van Loo's technique is the artist's command of colour (or lack thereof) : Diderot refers to the painting's colour as an unbearable "faste" ; a word with unambiguous connotations of ostentation. Diderot extends this remark on colour with the facetious comment that if this painting were a tapestry, its sheer lack of taste would inevitably require the dyer to be pensioned off. It is also significant that Diderot uses the verb "supporter" as the embodiment of everything that a viewer of this painting cannot do when beholding it. The work's colours are so charged with ostentation and with gaudiness that Diderot's use of "supporter" captures the depth of the viewer's inability to merely *look* at the painting, let alone engage with it. Diderot continues in this vein with his comment "on regarde, on est ébloui et on reste froid" : the depth of our astonishment is an unpleasant experience, and contributes to our coldness towards this painting.

Diderot also makes a scathing, even if comparatively smaller, attack upon *la vraisemblance mécanique* of the painting's drapery. Van Loo has failed to capture the correct texture and fall of the clothing he has represented, and has, through the drapery's dull reflections, made the fabric resemble an armoured breastplate of a coppery, yellow colour. Diderot's inability to identify the type of fabric is revealing in itself, as this only emphasises Van Loo's inability to paint nature using the principles of *la vraisemblance mécanique*. This commentary on drapery also strengthens Diderot's earlier, more detailed attack on colour, which was also grounded in Van Loo's inability to master *la vraisemblance mécanique*.

In Diderot's analysis of the technical aspects of this painting, he accuses Van Loo's use of colour and paint techniques of being so garish and so false that they do not represent the real world, or elicit any kind of emotion from the viewer. Diderot's earlier scathing remarks on Van Loo's ideal led him to note a similar lack of impact on the viewer. Thus, the inability of the viewer to respond to *Jason et Médée* with passion and pity may be attributed to both faulty ideal and to deficient technique. If Van Loo had demonstrated a better command of colour and a better rendition of drapery, the viewer would have been able to connect with this painting on an emotional level. Diderot, while not openly recognising this link between a mastery of colour and drapery, acknowledges that a good painting is created with skills relating to the painting's imaginative and emotional aspects, as well as technical skill. We may therefore say that while this link seems to exist in Diderot's mind on a subconscious level, it is not, as yet, acknowledged by him. It remains tacit, and is not verbalised.

### **3.3 *Salon de 1761***

Diderot's life from 1759 to 1761 is characterised by a closer association with artists, including Greuze and Chardin, which enabled Diderot to achieve a higher understanding of the creative process and of the artist's tools than is evident in the *Salon de 1759*. His descriptions and analyses of paintings in this *Salon de 1761* are longer and more detailed, and show a greater awareness of the methods employed by artists to create the works of art that would be exhibited at the *Salons*. This higher understanding of artistic technique does not, however, lead Diderot to abandon what one might call his "tunnel vision", that is, his tendency to make use of the thoughts and sentiments that certain works inspire as his sole criterion for the interpretation and criticism of art. While Diderot may show a slightly greater understanding of technique in the *Salon de 1761*, his knowledge of technique, which seems to remain insufficient, leads him to fall back on the privileging of ideal that he demonstrated in 1759, and at times to go as far as scorning technique as something that an art critic need not concern himself with.

Apart from Diderot's own avowed ignorance of the uses and purposes of the tools of the artist at this chronological juncture, the prevalence of the importance of ideal in Diderot's mind at this time is linked to the years 1757 to 1761 being the era in which Diderot was elaborating his dramatic theories ; theories that propose the reforming of classical French theatre in favour of works depicting the delights and dramas of ordinary people, the *bourgeois*, through the use of a theatrical and literary technique, the *tableaux dramatiques*. While references to

Diderot's dramatic theories do occasionally occur in the *Salon de 1759*, the evidence of these theories is most prevalent in the *Salon de 1761*, most notably in Diderot's celebrated analysis of Greuze's *L'Accordée du Village*. The object of this section of the chapter is to briefly summarise Diderot's dramatic theories, and then to discuss what effect these theories have on Diderot's criticism of Greuze's painting, both in terms of the methods employed by the artist, and as regards the passions that his work excites. This will enable us to examine the possibility of technique and ideal constituting two parts of a whole in Diderot's critique of this particular painting.

### 3.3.1 Diderot's dramatic theories

Diderot's dramatic theories were first realised in 1757 with his play *Le Fils Naturel*, and its companion piece *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, in which Diderot, as the character "Moi" discusses, with the character Dorval, the protagonist of *Le Fils Naturel*, the present state of theatre and the possibility of the creation of a new genre. Diderot expounds the ideas discussed by Moi and Dorval in another dramatic discourse, *De la poésie dramatique* (1758), and would finally bring them to full fruition in his 1761 play, *Le père de famille*. While three of the four works mentioned above were published before 1761, and *Le père de famille* in the same year as the *Salon de 1761*, the only significant influence that these theories have on the *Salon de 1759* is Diderot's analysis of *Jason et Médée*, discussed above. In the *Salon de 1761*, the influence of Diderot's dramatic theories is significant, and is felt on a much larger scale, particularly in his critique of Greuze's *L'Accordée du Village*. This influence will be demonstrated in this chapter by relating Diderot's dramatic theories to his analysis of Greuze's painting with the goal of ascertaining their role in Diderot's recognition or non-recognition of the interdependence of technique and ideal in the creation of great art.

The new genre of theatre proposed by Diderot would be different from classical theatre in several respects ; first, the subject matter. The play would be first and foremost a "tragédie domestique et bourgeoise" (Ramond 2007 in ed. Gaillard 2007 : 99) and would no longer feature the *dramatis personae* that an eighteenth-century audience would have been accustomed to seeing ; that is, a cast of royal, aristocratic and mythological characters waited on by servants, maids and valets and separated from the audience in time or space. The characters would instead be ordinary people of the same social class as the audience and with whom the audience could easily identify. The subject of the play, and its plot, would be a simple and accurate representation of the lives and troubles of ordinary people. Finally, and



most importantly in terms of Diderot's critique of *L'Accordée du Village*, the play would also have the didactic purpose of educating the audience about the joys of leading a pure and morally-sound existence (Ramond 2007 in ed. Gaillard 2007 : 99). Of all the technical characteristics of this new, true to life and morally-affirming genre of theatre, the most important was the *tableau dramatique*; a concept first introduced in *Entretiens sur le fils naturel* and *Discours de la poésie dramatique*. In a *tableau dramatique*, the actors position themselves on stage in a way that is so natural and true to life that a painter, in observing the actors and copying what he sees onto canvas, could hypothetically produce a work of art equal in complexity and in beauty. The *tableau dramatique* is therefore a kind of living painting created by the actors on stage ; a living painting so pleasing to the eye that it would serve equally well as a real painting and as an illusion created on stage.

The *tableau dramatique* has a long and complex history. French critics originally used the term *tableau* as an equivalent of the Latin term *hypotyposis*, a category of rhetoric that the Roman writer Quintilian defined as “the expression in words of a given situation in such a way that it seems to be a matter of seeing rather than of hearing” (Frantz 1998 in Worvil 2010 : 151). In Greek rhetoric, *hypotyposis* is called *ekphrasis*, though there is one important difference between these two concepts. *Hypotyposis* entailed the description of any visual object, while the term *ekphrasis* was to gradually metamorphose into one that could only be applied to the description of works of art. Thus, while the two concepts have identical goals – stimulating the listener's imagination and rousing his emotions so that the act of reading or listening has equal potency to that of seeing – *hypotyposis* and *ekphrasis* have opposite effects. *Hypotyposis*, as the verbal description of anything visual, achieves its goal. *Ekphrasis*, as a term that applies only to the verbal description of works of art, often alienates the reader on an emotional level, as it entails comparison between different media of art and causes rivalry between artists and writers. The writer, in order to exert his superiority over the artist, will often be as flowery and as overly-descriptive as he possibly can, making the reader feel that the original object cannot possibly live up to the way it has been described.

According to Worvil :

Diderot's approach thus shifts attention away from strictly literary preoccupations and directs it towards all that is visual in stage representation, thereby investing the traditional Horatian topos of *ut pictura poesis* with new significance (2010 : 151-152).

*Ut pictura poesis*, or the idea that a scene depicted in prose is just as pleasing when depicted in painting, is one that Diderot was to prove vehemently opposed to, particularly from the *Salon de 1765* onwards. In creating the *tableaux dramatiques*, Diderot demonstrates this opposition by giving new meaning to *ut pictura poesis* through his emphasis of the visual aspects that painting and drama have in common, and through his treatment of the two media as different manifestations of the same visual experience.

Diderot's dramatic theories did not create a revolution in theatre, and his plays did not enjoy the success for which he had hoped. The failure of Diderot's plays was, however, to prove beneficial to his art criticism, as this failure meant that another means of expressing the ideas inherent to his dramatic theories was required (Ramond 2007 in ed. Gaillard 2007 : 86). This was to come in the form of Diderot's art criticism of the works of Jean-Baptiste Greuze, whose creation of the "genre moral" in painting corresponded exactly to the moral message and intentions of Diderot's plays. With this "genre moral" or "peinture de genre", Greuze, like Diderot, intended to spread a message of morality that would place the noble emotions and self-sacrificing heroism played out by the royal, aristocratic and quasi-divine characters of neoclassical tragedy within the lives of ordinary, *bourgeois* people. This new genre of painting was to be highly sentimental, but grounded in realism, and would exist parallel to Diderot's "drame bourgeois" and to the sentimental novels of Samuel Richardson<sup>68</sup> (Bukdahl 2003 : 34), which were just then becoming fashionable in France.

There are several common denominators between Diderot's dramatic theories and Greuze's paintings. First, Greuze, like Diderot, advocated *la vraisemblance mécanique* : the portrayal of people and their surroundings as they exist in the real world. Second, both men held the conviction that the subject matter of art should portray the highest and noblest of human sentiment in such a vivid and effective way that the viewer would come to share these emotions with the figures, or the characters, that they observe. Third, Greuze and Diderot were both in favour of a moral dimension being necessary to art, so that the viewer, in observing such art, might be influenced to live his life in a better way (Ramond 2007 in ed. Gaillard 2007 : 87-88). Diderot believed that this latter point required a painting to possess a narrative and psychological complexity equal to that of a novel. In Diderot's opinion, Greuze achieves this in his paintings, which makes them the embodiment of Diderot's own,

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<sup>68</sup> The influence of Richardson on Greuze is a happy coincidence, as Diderot was also inspired by the English writer when writing *Discours de la poésie dramatique* in 1758, and went so far as to write an entire literary treatise on Richardson in 1762, entitled *Éloge à Richardson*.

new approach to *ut pictura poesis*, discussed above. A well-planned and well-executed *tableau dramatique* that draws the *eye* instead of the mind's eye, and that is able to appeal, through visual stimuli, to an audience's innermost thoughts and feelings, is far more effective at moving and influencing the viewer than constant soliloquising on morality ever could. These common convictions in Greuze and Diderot are the reasons that Greuze quickly became Diderot's favourite painter, and led him to write :

Voici votre peintre et le mien ; le premier qui se soit avisé parmi nous de donner des mœurs à l'art, et d'enchaîner des événements d'après lesquels il serait facile de faire un roman (Dieckmann, Proust and Varloot XIV : 177 in Bukdahl 2003 : 34).

The similarities between Diderot's dramatic theories and Greuze's artistic *credo* are what leads Diderot to treat *L'Accordée du Village* as a *tableau dramatique* and to evoke the ideas shared by him and Greuze. These shared artistic convictions, together with the fact that the failure of Diderot's plays inspired him to channel his new theatrical philosophy into his art criticism (Ramond 2007 in ed. Gaillard 2007 : 86), justify our discussion of and references to Diderot's dramatic ideas in our analysis of his description of *L'Accordée du Village*. The shared ideas of Diderot and Greuze, that is, the teaching of morality through emotion and narrative complexity, are all connected to ideal, as they all appeal to the viewer's emotion and imagination in order to influence him. We will make use of these aspects of the *tableau dramatique*, if and when they occur in *L'Accordée du Village*, to ascertain whether their reliance on the viewer's emotion leads Diderot to remain favourable of ideal as a criterion for art criticism, or whether the technical nature of the *tableau dramatique* will lead Diderot to a newfound recognition of the importance of technique. We will also attempt to establish, through our continued examination of the respective roles of technique and ideal, whether Diderot acknowledges the possibility of the interdependence of these two concepts.

### 3.3.2 Greuze : *L'Accordée du Village*<sup>69</sup>

*L'Accordée du Village* was one of the most enduringly popular French paintings of the eighteenth century. It is generally called *L'Accordée du Village*, but Greuze's own title was *Un Mariage*, with the sub-title *et l'instant où le père de l'Accordée délivre la dot à son Gendre*. According to Bukdahl, the Protestant Greuze's choice of the word "mariage" is significant, as the painting's subject matter makes it clear that Greuze is referring to "une promesse de mariage", or the registering of a marriage before a notary. For French

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<sup>69</sup> See Appendix 3 (page 198) for full text of article.

Protestants, this act was equal in solemnity, and above all validity, to a religious wedding, while for French Catholics, a marriage promise was simply a customary accompaniment to the sacramental marriage celebrated by a priest (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 225). In choosing to focus on a Protestant marriage promise rather than a Catholic church wedding in this painting, Greuze has, according to Bukdahl, almost certainly created a work of art that represents his own marriage, and marriage promise, to Anne-Gabrielle Babuti, at the Église Saint-Médard on the third of February 1759. There is also a very strong possibility that the dowry paid by the father figure in *L'Accordée du Village* parallels the generous dowry of 10 000 livres gifted by Anne-Gabrielle's parents to the young couple (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 225) and that Greuze's painting is infused with his own joy and determination to lead an honourable married life.

*L'Accordée du Village* and its message of respectful filial and romantic love captured the popular imagination in many different ways. The acting company *Les Comédiens Italiens* appropriately created a *tableau dramatique* from it for use in their play *Les Noces d'Arlequin*. The abbé Aubert, inspired by *L'Accordée du Village*, produced a moral fable in verse from it, in which a rich financier encounters a scene similar to that depicted in the painting while paying a visit to a farmer ; he is so touched by what he sees that he makes a considerable gift to the young married couple.

At the Salon of 1771, *La Muse errante au Salon*, a curious, satirical publication that provided an “Apologie-Critique en Vers Libre” of each successive *Salon*, produced the following lines regarding Flipart's 1771 engraving of *L'Accordée du Village* :

Greuze, peintre charmant, de toi nous n'avons rien :  
 Tu punis le public...Bon ! quelle est ton idée ?  
 Le burin de Flipart nous en console bien ;  
 Nous avons sous les yeux ton aimable *Accordée*.  
 (ed. Cailleau 1771 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 225)

The influence and the importance of *L'Accordée du Village* is demonstrated everywhere in this little verse. It is significant that Greuze is here familiarly addressed as “tu” in a way that makes him seem the intimate friend of every Salon-goer. It is equally important that Greuze's failure to exhibit is described as a punishment for which the public must seek consolation. The informal mode of address, and the suggestion that the artist's omission constitutes a form of punishment for his admirers, demonstrate the degree to which the Salon-going public identified with Greuze's work, and consequently with the artist as the producer of that work.

The popularity and significance of *L'Accordée du Village* is also made evident by the large amounts of money that have changed hands in the course of its history. The Marquis de Marigny initially paid 9000 *livres* for it, and in years to come the painting fetched greater sums as it came to be known as Greuze's definitive work amongst his prolific works of *peinture de genre*. In 1782, when Marigny's art collection was sold and fears began to circulate that *L'Accordée du Village* might share the fate of Greuze's *La Piété Filiale* and be purchased by a foreign buyer, a great deal of trouble was gone to in order to keep the painting in France. D'Angiviller, the *directeur des Bâtiments du Roi*, authorised Pierre, *premier peintre du roi*, to spend up to 24 000 *livres* to purchase the painting for the Crown. At auction, d'Angiviller's representative Jouillain spent 16 650 *livres* and successfully bought the painting for Louis XVI's collection. This purchase confirmed the painting's status as a national treasure, and makes Grimm's 1763 remark that *L'Accordée du Village* "sera un jour sans prix" (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 225-226) seem oddly prophetic.

*L'Accordée du Village* was only exhibited in the last two weeks of the *Salon*. The delay greatly added to the anticipation surrounding the painting. Diderot, having finished most of the text of the *Salon de 1761*, was obliged to write an addition to the *Salon* in which he discussed the painting in detail and included commentaries on a few other works that he had previously omitted to discuss (Bukdahl in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 226). Diderot was greatly impressed by *L'Accordée du Village*, praising its formal grace and *vraisemblance*, but especially allowing himself to be caught up in its emotion and dramatic conception :

Enfin je l'ai vu, ce tableau de notre ami Greuze ; mais ce n'a pas été sans peine ; il continue d'attirer la foule. C'est *Un Père qui vient de payer la dot de sa fille*. Le sujet est pathétique, et l'on se sent gagner d'une émotion douce en le regardant. La composition m'en a paru très-belle : c'est la chose comme elle a dû se passer. Il y a douze figures ; chacune est à sa place, et fait ce qu'elle doit. Comme elles s'enchaînent toutes ! comme elles vont en ondoyant et en pyramidant ! Je me moque de ces conditions ; cependant quand elles se rencontrent dans un morceau de peinture par hasard, sans que le peintre ait eu la pensée de les y introduire, sans qu'il leur ait rien sacrifié, elles me plaisent (Assézat X : 152).

The subject matter is described as "pathétique" ; a word clearly linked to the Greek concept of *pathos*, that is, to the pity and fear that an audience experiences at the climax of a classical

tragedy (Butcher n.d : VI)<sup>70</sup>. In evoking *pathos* at the beginning of his description of *L'Accordée du Village*, Diderot is creating an emotional parallel between the lives of ordinary people and the lives of the aristocratic and divine characters of classical tragedy, one of the goals of his newly-conceived *tragédie domestique et bourgeoise*. Diderot does not, however, go on to suggest that the painting arouses pity and fear, only “une émotion douce”, a term redolent of sweet, moral goodness that he possibly intends to be equal in intensity to the pity and fear evoked by the word “pathétique”. In praising the manner in which this painting’s subject matter is conducive to inspiring emotion, Diderot makes use of ideal as a prism through which to critique this painting from the very beginning of this analysis. In the above introduction to Diderot’s critique of *L'Accordée du Village*, the philosopher’s only positive comments on technique are his observations that the composition appears “très belle” and that the layout of the twelve figures creates a pyramid formation linked by a serpentine line. This enthusiasm for the artist’s technique is short-lived, however, and is swiftly followed by Diderot’s assertion that he refuses to trouble himself with technique : “je me moque de ces conditions”. Diderot’s use of the verb “se moquer” is noteworthy, as this verb does not suggest mockery, but indifference. Technique, in Diderot’s opinion, should be ignored. Diderot then goes further in his discrediting of the artist’s tools by declaring that when correct artistic technique appears to come naturally to the artist and does not detract from the expressive qualities of the work in question, then technique becomes something he is able to appreciate. This idea of technique being present by chance and as an unconscious process would seem to suggest a conviction that technique, along with inspiration, cannot be taught or learnt. Technique, like inspiration, is a talent. In dismissing the importance of artistic training, Diderot seems to be placing himself firmly in favour of ideal in this *Salon*, and does not seem to desire to be any more attentive to it in 1761 than he was in 1759. This, in turn, would seem to make it still more unlikely that Diderot, at this point in time, recognises a connection between the methods used by the artist and the emotional, imaginative outcome of the work he creates. It is difficult to imagine how Diderot may envision an interdependent relationship between technique and ideal if the former deserves indifference, and is only an insignificant aspect of the latter. This implication that ideal is superior to technique and that technique should be sacrificed in favour of ideal sets the tone for the rest of his critique. The following analysis of Diderot’s critique of *L'Accordée du Village* will therefore be structured so as to keep the question regarding Diderot’s conviction in the superiority of ideal foremost in our

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<sup>70</sup> No page number provided in web document.

minds. If and when there is a mention of technique, we will examine it in the context of Diderot's claim that technique should be subordinate to ideal, with the aim of determining whether or not he is consistent in this claim. This will help us to determine whether or not Diderot identifies a link between technique and ideal in the creation of a *grande oeuvre* in this *Salon*.

Diderot begins his analysis of *L'Accordée du Village* by describing and discussing several figures ; the first being the notary :

Le tabellion est vêtu de noir, culotte et bas de couleur, en manteau et en rabat, le chapeau sur la tête. Il a bien l'air un peu matois et chicanier, comme il convient à un paysan de sa profession ; c'est une belle figure (Assézat X : 152).

Diderot claims that Greuze's depiction of the notary's face is beautiful because it expresses a deceitfulness that Diderot believes is present in all men of this profession. This shows that the figure has been painted with *vraisemblance mécanique* and is true to life. *Vraisemblance mécanique* being one of the principal aspects of Diderot's dramatic theory, it is important that he commences his analysis by taking note of it, as this sets the tone for treating the rest of the painting as a *tableau dramatique*. It is also significant that in the context of this figure's *vraisemblance mécanique*, Diderot makes no mention of the role of Greuze's technique, i.e. the artist's choice of colour or form. He simply speaks of the *vraisemblance mécanique* of the figure's deceitful air. Diderot's analysis of this figure being focussed on the content of the painting rather than the artistic methods employed to create that content implies that to Diderot, ideal is more important than technique in the effectiveness of the rendition of this figure.

The next figure that Diderot discusses is the child :

L'enfant qui est entre les jambes du tabellion est excellent pour la vérité de son action et de sa couleur. Sans s'intéresser à ce qui se passe, il regarde les papiers griffonnés, et promène ses petites mains par-dessus (Assézat X : 152).

Diderot's praise of Greuze's portrayal of the child encompasses both technique and ideal, with technique being subordinate to ideal. This is evident in that the figure is praised for the *vraisemblance mécanique* of its action and its colour, but only the former is mentioned in any kind of detail, as Diderot speaks of the child's inattention to his surroundings and of his

attempts to control his boredom by running his hands over the pieces of paper that have already been scribbled upon. Diderot's description is entirely concerned with *la vraisemblance mécanique* of the child's actions. The realism of the figure of the child is achieved chiefly by *what* is painted (the child's actions), rather than by *how* it is painted (the colour only is mentioned), because this realism is achieved by the painting's content. The content of a painting is a matter of ideal rather than technique, because it is linked to a painter's imagination. Consequently, we can conclude that Diderot keeps technique subordinate to ideal in his description of the child, because he focusses on content rather than on colour. This is consistent with his approach in describing this *Salon*, namely that a painting's ability to capture the viewer's imagination is the most important aspect of a painting's success and that technique should only be present as an unobtrusive undercurrent.

Diderot maintains this focus on aspects related to ideal in his discussion of the figure of the elder sister :

On voit dans la sœur aînée, qui est appuyée debout sur le dos du fauteuil de son père, qu'elle crève de douleur et de jalousie de ce qu'on a accordé le pas sur elle à sa cadette. Elle a la tête portée sur une de ses mains, et lance sur les fiancés des regards curieux, chagrins et courroucés (Assézat X : 153).

This analysis provides another example of a figure's emotions being conveyed by a painting's content. It is revealed to us that the figure's envy of her younger sister is considerable, and that this jealousy is conveyed both by the way she rests her head on one of her hands, and by the curious, mortified and angry looks that she directs towards the betrothed couple. In this continued focus on content rather than on form or colour, Diderot once again privileges ideal and ignores the role played by the painter's technical skill.

It is in the description of the central figure, the father, that Diderot begins to make his most striking use of *ekphrasis*, and, in a manner consistent with the ideas in his dramatic theories, to treat a painting as a thing as complex in plot, character and psychology as a novel, or in this case, a play. Diderot achieves this by animating the figures (Ramond 2007 in ed. Gaillard 2007: 87) that is, by bringing them to life and making them speak as though they were characters in a novel or play :

Le père est un vieillard de soixante ans, en cheveux gris, un mouchoir tortillé autour de son cou ; il a un air de bonhomie qui plaît. Les bras étendus vers son gendre, il lui parle avec une



effusion de cœur qui enchante ; il semble lui dire : “ Jeannette est douce et sage ; elle fera ton bonheur ; songe à faire le sien... ” ou quelque autre chose sur l’importance des devoirs du mariage... Ce qu’il dit est sûrement touchant et honnête (Assézat X : 153).

Diderot begins his analysis by briefly describing the father, mentioning only the three key visual points that characterise him. He is sixty, and wears a grey kerchief around his neck, the colour grey being indicative of his age, the wisdom that comes with it and the respect that his age commands. This characterisation is followed by a comment regarding the feelings that the figure arouses in Diderot. The father figure is kind, appealing by virtue of his kindness, and he exudes positive energy : his emotional state is described as an “effusion de cœur”, a veritable overflowing of heartfelt sentiments that are so effectively portrayed by Greuze that they are described as enchanting the viewer. The overwhelmingly positive emotions that are provoked in the viewer’s heart and in his imagination due to this visual representation of the father are then taken a step further by Diderot, who imagines what the father may be saying to his son-in-law. In giving the daughter a common French name, Jeannette, Diderot brings the painting squarely to the level of the ordinary citizen. In making the father speak about her, Diderot employs *ekphrasis* with the intention of heightening the reader’s imagination and of awakening in him the same sentiments that the painter is able to evoke in the viewer. Diderot makes use of the literary genre of drama to elicit the same emotions, through words, that Greuze elicits with paint. Diderot thus makes use of a literary technique in order to convey the emotional aspect of a painting and, most importantly, does not attempt to do this through a description of the techniques employed by Greuze : there is no mention of the role of layout or perspective, for example, in touching the viewer emotionally.

Diderot’s use of *ekphrasis* in this analysis of the father figure does not only aim to elicit emotion in the reader, but to fulfil the didactic purpose of the *tableau dramatique* in teaching morality through art. Diderot uses *ekphrasis* to imagine what the father figure may be saying to his future son-in-law ; his words may represent a gentle call for the maintaining of his daughter’s happiness or be a discourse on marital duty that Diderot imagines to be touching and honest by virtue of the father figure’s pleasing appearance. This certainty that the father’s words are “touchant et honnête” creates a concentration on the importance of family and of marital duty and on the positive portrayal of both. Therefore, the father figure has a great emotional effect on the reader, largely thanks to the air of morality about him that is designed to teach virtue to the viewer.

This didactic aspect of the portrayal of the father figure coincides with the didactic aspect of Diderot's dramatic theory. This correlation has been achieved without a single mention of technique, but rather with an in-depth investigation of the emotional effect that the father figure has on the viewer. Therefore, in Diderot's analysis of *L'Accordée du Village*, it is ideal rather than technique that continues to dominate ; a fact which coincides with Diderot's earlier declaration that one should only pay attention to technique if it does not detract from ideal.

This air of optimistic morality exuded by the father figure is also present in Diderot's analysis of the fiancé and fiancée :

Le fiancé est d'une figure tout à fait agréable. Il est hâlé de visage; mais on voit qu'il est blanc de peau ; il est un peu penché vers son beau-père ; il prête attention à son discours, il en a l'air pénétré ; il est fait au tour, et vêtu à merveille, sans sortir de son état. J'en dis autant de tous les autres personnages (Assézat X : 153).

The attractiveness of the fiancé ties in with his aim of discoursing on the attractiveness of morality. The young man is described as agreeable, good-looking, well-dressed and so earnest that he is not remotely put off by a lecture on marital duty. The fiancé is not just listening to his father-in-law, he is "un peu penché", that is, leaning forward intently ; he is "pénétré", utterly absorbed, in the moral advice that is being passed on to him. His outlook on his marital duty is extremely serious, and his solemnity convinces us of the moral supremacy of his character. The superiority that we see in the figure of the *fiancé* is consistent with Diderot's belief in the teaching of morality through art. The correctness of the fiancé figure's stance on marriage may very well have considered a *fait accompli* following *L'Accordée du Village*'s popularity at the *Salon de 1761*, for a painting with strong moral themes that receives overwhelming admiration has the potential to create emulation in the public that views and admires it. It is at this point that we should mention that the entire moral effect of the fiancé figure is described and admired by Diderot without a single mention of Greuze's technical proficiency, but only of the emotional effect the figure has on the viewer. This is consistent with Diderot's entire attitude to this painting : ideal reigns supreme, and technique should only be mentioned when it does not detract from ideal.

This attitude towards technique extends into Diderot's discussion of the fiancée :

Le peintre a donné à la fiancée une figure charmante, décente et réservée ; elle est vêtue à merveille. Ce tablier de toile blanc fait on ne peut pas mieux ; il y a un peu de luxe dans sa garniture ; mais c'est un jour de fiançailles. Il faut voir comme les plis de tous les vêtements de cette figure et des autres sont vrais. Cette fille charmante n'est point droite ; mais il y a une légère et molle inflexion dans toute sa figure et dans tous ses membres qui la remplit de grâce et de vérité. Elle est jolie vraiment, et très-jolie. Une gorge faite au tour qu'on ne voit point du tout ; mais je gage qu'il n'y a rien là qui la relève, et que cela se soutient tout seul. Plus à son fiancé, et elle n'eût pas été assez décente ; plus à sa mère ou à son père, et elle eût été fausse. Elle a le bras à demi passé sous celui de son futur époux, et le bout de ses doigts tombe et appuie doucement sur sa main ; c'est la seule marque de tendresse qu'elle lui donne, et peut-être sans le savoir elle-même ; c'est une idée délicate du peintre (Assézat X : 153).

The girl's stance is said to be an "inflexion" : she is leaning only slightly forwards, and this fills her with grace and *vraisemblance mécanique*. Diderot speaks admiringly of the fiancée's breasts, which are described as being both beautiful and without need of supporting garments. This leads the girl to hang her head for reasons both of modesty and morality. This is significant, as she seems to be aware of her own desirability and seeks to cultivate a modest attitude towards it ; thus strengthening Diderot's moral message. Despite the girl's modest demeanour, she has laced her arm loosely around that of her fiancée, apparently without realising that she is doing so. This small betrayal of emotion reinforces Diderot's upholding of morality in the painting, because the fiancée, upon getting married, must affect the modesty of seeming neither too happy nor too sad to be leaving her parents for her fiancé. In marrying, she is doing what is right and moral in society, and she is not allowing her personal emotions to seem to play a role in her decision.

As in the case of the other figures that Diderot discusses in this painting, the effect that the fiancée has on the viewer is principally achieved by ideal, by what Diderot has been driven to imagine about her. The only technical remark made by Diderot is related to the *vraisemblance mécanique* of the drapery of the fiancée's dress, however he submerges this reference to technique with a comment on the appropriateness of the garment's richness, which falls within the realm of ideal. Once again Diderot is viewing this painting as a *tableau dramatique*, that is, as a visual experience in which content and trueness to life alone play a significant role. In his discussion of both fiancé figures, Diderot has relied heavily on treating

*L'Accordée du Village* as a *tableau dramatique*. Through descriptions of their appearances, actions and externally-expressed emotions and morals, the allure of these two figures lies exclusively in the visual, and therefore in the ideal, for we are only afforded an opportunity to observe what is painted rather than how such painting comes about.

The portrayal of the fiancée's mother possesses similar emotional weight to that of the father:

La mère est une bonne paysanne qui touche à la soixantaine, mais qui a de la santé ; elle est aussi vêtue large et à merveille. D'une main elle tient le haut du bras de sa fille ; de l'autre, elle serre le bras au-dessus du poignet : elle est assise ; elle regarde sa fille de bas en haut ; elle a bien quelque peine à la quitter ; mais le parti est bon. Jean est un brave garçon, honnête et laborieux ; elle ne doute point que sa fille ne soit heureuse avec lui. La gaieté et la tendresse sont mêlées dans la physionomie de cette bonne mère (Assézat X : 153 - 154).

The emotions of the mother figure are reflected only in her actions, none of which Diderot attributes to technique, but only to content, and therefore to ideal. She is described as a virtuous peasant woman who is nearing the age of sixty. She is appropriately-dressed, and of a healthy physical appearance : while she herself is not described as large, her clothing is, which seems to suggest a link in Diderot's mind between largeness and good health or generosity of spirit. The mother's emotions are conveyed by the way that she holds her daughter with both hands and gazes at her as though she does not want to be parted from her. The reader is, however, able to perceive that the mother knows her daughter will be happy in her marriage through Diderot's use of free indirect speech. By using this literary technique, Diderot is able to express the imagined words of the figure without inverted commas and without the grammatical terms that would indicate reported speech. He thus abolishes the distance between the reader and the painting. The words spoken by the mother, which we know to be hers from the sincere and loving tone in which they are spoken, express her happiness at her daughter's engagement : "Jean est un brave garçon, honnête et laborieux ; elle ne doute point que sa fille ne soit heureuse avec lui". The mother's contentment is therefore bittersweet, and deepens Diderot's moral message : the mother endures a necessary pain in order to ensure her daughter's happiness, and has a sincere belief in that happiness ; her conduct teaches the viewer a moral lesson on the importance of the family unit. To convey this moral message to the reader Diderot does not talk of technique, but of the emotive and moral qualities of the painting : in other words, of ideal. Therefore, in Diderot's

analysis of the mother figure, his preference for ideal over technique continues, as it is ideal that allows art to convey a moral message.

This notion of ideal being the most important aspect of art if it is to serve some kind of moral purpose continues to be expressed when Diderot analyses the little family of chickens at the bottom of the painting :

Et cette poule qui a mené ses poussins au milieu de la scène, et qui a cinq ou six petits, comme la mère aux pieds de laquelle elle cherche sa vie a six à sept enfants, et cette petite fille qui leur jette du pain et qui les nourrit ; il faut avouer que tout cela est d'une convenance charmante avec la scène qui se passe, et avec le lieu et les personnages. Voilà un petit trait de poésie tout à fait ingénieux (Assézat X : 154).

Diderot describes the episode of the chickens as being a charmingly appropriate parallel of the scene taking place around them ; most likely because the inclusion of the chickens suits his moral purposes very well. The viewer and the reader smile benignly on the happiness of this wonderful little family that portrays filial happiness as being present and above all natural in both the human and animal realms. Diderot makes no mention of the superiority of Greuze's technique in the conveyance of this idea, only of the moral sentiment evoked in the viewer. Diderot's analysis of the portrayal of the family of chickens therefore reinforces his earlier message that ideal is the most important aspect of a painting and that technique should only be evidenced when it does not detract from this.

Following his analysis of the figures in *L'Accordée du Village* and the relationship between them, Diderot takes a moment to discuss Greuze's place in genre painting, and makes his very few criticisms of this painting :

Teniers peint des mœurs plus vraies peut-être. Il serait plus aisé de retrouver les scènes et les personnages de ce peintre ; mais il y a plus d'élégance, plus de grâce, une nature plus agréable dans Greuze. Ses paysans ne sont ni grossiers comme ceux de notre bon Flamand, ni chimériques comme ceux de Boucher. Je crois Teniers fort supérieur à Greuze pour la couleur. Je lui crois aussi beaucoup plus de fécondité : c'est d'ailleurs un grand paysagiste, un grand peintre d'arbres, de forêts, d'eaux, de montagnes, de chaumières et d'animaux (Assézat X : 154 – 155).

Here, Diderot states his opinion that Teniers may indeed paint “des mœurs plus vraies” when compared to Greuze, before going on to dismiss *la vraisemblance mécanique* which has been

so important to him throughout his entire analysis, the reason being that the peasantry, as portrayed by Greuze, is far more elegant, graceful and agreeable than the uncouth or utopic peasant figures of Teniers and Boucher respectively, and thus presents a vision of nature that is more agreeable. By its obvious disregard for the accurate portrayal of the truth that Diderot has so rigorously championed in his analysis of *L'Accordée du Village*, this strange reflection on Greuze, Teniers and Boucher seems to contradict the entire analysis that precedes it. This contradiction is not vitally important for our purposes, however, since in proving that he prefers elegance to *la vraisemblance mécanique*, Diderot has only further shown his preference for ideal and imagination over technique when it comes to the emotional effect a work of art may have on him.

In the following section, which follows the primary analysis above of *L'Accordée du Village*, we will discuss the negative comments that Diderot makes about the painting, this with the aim of determining whether these more unenthusiastic parts of Diderot's critique demonstrate a preference for ideal over technique, or vice-versa.

On peut reprocher à Greuze d'avoir répété une même tête dans trois tableaux différents. La tête du *Père qui paye la dot* et celle du *Père qui lit l'Écriture sainte à ses enfants* et je crois aussi celle du *Paralytique*. Ou du moins ce sont trois frères avec un grand air de famille (...) Je ne sais si la tête de cette sœur aînée n'est pas aussi celle de la *Blanchisseuse* (Assézat X : 155).

The most prevalent issue in this extract is Greuze's use of two figures who are replicated in multiple paintings ; namely those of the father and the elder sister. This defect concerns both technique and ideal. From a technical perspective, the use of the same figure multiple times reveals a lack of variety on the part of the artist ; a defect that is argued against in most major aesthetic treatises, including those of Alberti (1435), Leonardo (1561), the *Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture* (1668), Oudry (1748), Hogarth (1753) and La Font de Saint Yenne (1747 and 1754). In terms of ideal, utilising the same figure in three different paintings makes it difficult to preserve the imaginative effect of a painting, because it is difficult to believe that a figure is an elder sister when one's mind has already accepted her as Greuze's *Blanchisseuse*. In this brief mention of the three repeated figures, Diderot does not provide enough information to make us think that either technique or ideal is superior, but he partly solves this problem for us by questioning the identity of the figure leaning over the father's chair :

Autre défaut. Cette sœur aînée, est-ce une sœur ou une servante ? Si c'est une servante, elle a tort d'être appuyée sur le dos de la chaise de son maître, et je ne sais pourquoi elle envie si violemment le sort de sa maîtresse ; si c'est un enfant de la maison, pourquoi cet air ignoble, pourquoi ce négligé ? Contente ou mécontente, il fallait la vêtir comme elle doit l'être aux fiançailles de sa sœur. Je vois qu'on s'y trompe, que la plupart de ceux qui regardent le tableau la prennent pour une servante, et que les autres sont perplexes (Assézat X : 155).

The ambiguous identity of the female figure is criticised by Diderot in a way which suggests that this criticism is again related to Diderot's preference for ideal over technique ; as the girl's expression and costume, which should give us a very clear indication as to who she is, only serve to deepen the ambiguity surrounding her identity. This figure's ambiguity calls into question the painting's *vraisemblance mécanique* : in questioning her identity, we question what is painted rather than how it is painted. Therefore, the problem that Diderot identifies is concerned with the ideal rather than with the technique that went into the creation of the figure. Diderot's comments on the girl are therefore consistent with his attitude throughout this entire *Salon*, namely, that ideal is superior to technique, and that the role of technique in a painting should only be recognised if it does not detract from an understanding of the painting's emotional and imaginative thrust.

Diderot is quick to point out that none of the defects he identifies really matter in terms of the painting's overall effect :

Mais il vaudrait bien mieux négliger ces bagatelles, et s'extasier sur un morceau qui présente des beautés de tous côtés ; c'est certainement ce que Greuze a fait de mieux. Ce morceau lui fera honneur, et comme peintre savant dans son art, et comme homme d'esprit et de goût. Sa composition est pleine d'esprit et de délicatesse. Le choix de ses sujets marque de la sensibilité et de bonnes mœurs (Assézat X : 155).

In referring to his criticism of *L'Accordée du Village* as "ces bagatelles" or trifles, Diderot definitively proves himself to be in favour of ideal over technique. We may therefore conclude that in the *Salon de 1761*, Diderot considers ideal to be infinitely more important than technique in the successful creation of a work of art and does not yet consider the two to be equal participants in a symbiotic relationship.

### 3.4 Salon de 1763

In the *Salon de 1763*, Diderot's art criticism does not yet express a profound understanding of the artist's tools and methods. It is in this *Salon*, however, that he begins to demonstrate an understanding contrary to his former opinions, that the comprehension of technique is indeed an important part of art criticism (Wilson 1971 : 461). Though Diderot does not yet reveal any conviction in the notion of technique and ideal working together in the creation of a great work of art, this *Salon* represents an important step forward in terms of the importance of technique. Indeed, in his analysis of Deshayes' *La Chasteté de Joseph* he poses the question : "Qu'est-ce que ce technique?".

Qu'est-ce que ce technique ? L'art de sauver un certain nombre de dissonances, d'esquiver les difficultés supérieures à l'art. Je défie le plus hardi d'entre eux de suspendre le soleil ou la lune au milieu de sa composition sans offusquer ces deux astres ou de vapeurs ou de nuages ; je le défie de choisir son ciel tel qu'il est en nature, parsemé d'étoiles brillantes comme dans la nuit la plus sereine. De là la nécessité d'un certain choix d'objets et de couleurs ; encore après ce choix, quelque bien fait qu'il puisse être, le meilleur tableau, le plus harmonieux, n'est-il qu'un tissu de faussetés qui se couvrent les unes les autres. Il y a des objets qui gagnent, d'autres qui perdent, et la grande magie consiste à approcher tout près de nature et à faire que tout perde ou gagne proportionnellement ; mais alors ce n'est plus la scène réelle et vraie qu'on voit, ce n'en est pour ainsi dire que la traduction. De là, cent à parier contre un qu'un tableau dont on prescrira rigoureusement l'ordonnance à l'artiste sera mauvais, parce que c'est lui demander tacitement de se former tout à coup une palette nouvelle. Il en est en ce point de la peinture comme de l'art dramatique. Le poète dispose son sujet relativement aux scènes dont il se sent le talent, dont il croit se tirer avec avantage. Jamais Racine n'eût bien rempli le canevas des *Horaces* ; jamais Corneille n'eût bien rempli le canevas de *Phèdre* (Assézat X : 187-188).

In this passage Diderot acknowledges the difficulty, or indeed the impossibility, of being completely true to nature. To create harmony in a painting, the artist needs to paint "un tissu de faussetés qui se couvrent les unes les autres", and in order to preserve proportion, it is sometimes necessary to change the way that objects truly appear in nature : "la grande magie consiste à approcher tout près de nature et à faire que tout perde ou gagne proportionnellement". What we see in a painting is not, therefore, an exact copy of a scene, it is really, only a "translation". This represents a transition in Diderot's thinking from *la vraisemblance mécanique* to *la vraisemblance poétique*. In the past, he had only concerned



himself with the accurate portrayal of nature. In this *Salon*, in calling for the “translation” of a scene and referring to a painting as “un tissu de faussetés”, he acknowledges the need for the artist to alter nature in order to achieve harmony. This evolution from *vraisemblance mécanique* to *vraisemblance poétique* leads Diderot to conclude that it is inadvisable to tell an artist exactly what to paint, because the result will inevitably be bad : the artist must be left alone to portray the subject in a way that best demonstrates his own talent. Diderot concludes this reflection on the meaning of technique by creating an analogy with the dramatists Racine and Corneille : the one could not have created the work of the other and vice versa. An artist must therefore be left to create according to his strengths.

Diderot’s new attention to technique is further evident in his analysis of Restout’s *Orphée descendu aux enfers pour demander Eurydice*, in which he makes the observation that the superior art of this “grand maître” (Assézat X : 167) can be seen in the painting’s harmony and in the way the groups of figures are distributed throughout the canvas. He presents this observation, not as a statement but in a rhetorical question, thereby reinforcing his new attention to technique, and therefore his questioning of it and his desire to understand it : “n’est-ce pas assez que dans l’harmonie générale, dans la distribution des groupes, dans la liaison des parties de la composition, on reconnaisse encore le grand maître?” (Assézat X : 167).

Is it possible, therefore, to conclude that Diderot’s newfound appreciation of technique and its role in “translating” a scene, as well as his improved knowledge thereof, are sufficient to declare that at this stage of his career as art critic, he begins to express an awareness of the interdependence between technique and ideal? Or is he still completely focussed on ideal, so that in his art criticism, the possibility of a symbiotic relationship existing between the two concepts is present only at a subconscious level? Discovering this will be the aim of this chapter’s examination of the *Salon de 1763* and Diderot’s analysis of Carle Van Loo’s *Les Grâces enchaînées par l’amour*.

### 3.4.1 Carle Van Loo : *Les Grâces enchaînées par l’amour*<sup>71</sup>

Diderot’s analysis of *Les Grâces enchaînées par l’amour*<sup>72</sup> is a scathing criticism of Van Loo’s technique and a fine example of the fledgling appreciation for technique that Diderot demonstrates throughout this *Salon*. In our analysis, we will, as in our previous analyses,

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<sup>71</sup> See Appendix 3 (page 201) for full text of article.

<sup>72</sup> Hereafter called *Les Grâces*.

examine Diderot's reflections on the artist's methods and ability to capture the imagination in order to determine if any connection is made by him between the two concepts.

Diderot's critique begins with a description of the painting :

C'est un grand tableau de 7 pieds 6 pouces de haut sur 6 pieds 3 pouces de large.

Les trois Grâces l'occupent presque tout entier. Celle qui est à droite du spectateur se voit par le dos ; celle du milieu, de face ; la troisième de profil. Un Amour élevé sur la pointe du pied, placé entre ces deux dernières et tournant le dos au spectateur, conduit de la main une guirlande qui passe sur les fesses de celle qu'on voit par le dos, et va cacher, en remontant, les parties naturelles de celle qui se présente de face.

Ah ! mon ami, quelle guirlande ! quel Amour ! quelles Grâces ! Il me semble que la jeunesse, l'innocence, la gaieté, la légèreté, la mollesse, un peu de tendre volupté, devaient former leur caractère; c'est ainsi que le bon Homère les imagina et que la tradition poétique nous les a transmises (Assézat X : 161).

The first two paragraphs of this description of the painting's content and layout are characterised by a dry tone and a lack of emotive adjectives that create a certain ambiguity in respect of Diderot's opinion of the painting. These two paragraphs are then followed by an outpouring of exclamations, and a list of nouns, beginning with the rhetoric apostrophe "Ah! mon ami, quelle guirlande! quelle Amour! Quelles Grâces"! This sudden burst of enthusiasm is somewhat ambiguous, as Diderot's exclamations may express wonder and amazement, but may also be ironical : the tone of this rhetoric apostrophe is too indistinct for us to be entirely certain. The list of nouns that directly follow these exclamations, "la jeunesse, l'innocence, la gaieté, la légèreté, un peu de tendre volupté, devaient former leur caractère", all have positive connotations, and dispose us to believe in the sincerity of Diderot's admiration for Van Loo. Diderot then leads us to question the candour of his enthusiasm for this painting by his using the verb "devoir" in the imperfect followed by an infinitive. "Devoir" in this tense is used to refer to an action that could or should have taken place, but that has not come to pass. Therefore, in this context, Diderot's use of the verb "devoir" could signify that youth, innocence and "tendre volupté" are necessary attributes of the *classical* Graces that are not present in Van Loo's representation of them. Diderot confirms this with the phrase "c'est

ainsi que le bon Homère les imagina”. This phrase tells us that the gratifying nouns Diderot has used to express the character traits of the Graces describe how Homer, and the Homeric tradition imagined them, thus making it clear that his zeal for the Graces does not refer to those depicted in Van Loo’s painting, but to the Graces as they exist according to the rules of classical tradition. Diderot’s liking and respect for these rules are confirmed by his characterisation of Homer as “le bon”. This appellation is an affectionate one, and has its cultural parallel in the English term “good old”. Applying this term to Homer makes household words of the singer-poet of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and the great classical traditional to which he belongs, and may suggest that Diderot considers himself and Homer to be on the same level. In thus clarifying that his allegiances lie with the classical tradition, Diderot reveals his earlier exclamations of “quelle guirlande! quel Amour! quelles Grâces!” to be ironical :

[Les Grâces] de Van Loo sont si lourdes, mais si lourdes ! L’une est d’un noir jaunâtre ; c’est le gros embonpoint d’une servante d’hôtellerie et le teint d’une fille qui a les pâles couleurs (Assézat X : 161).

Diderot does not paint Van Loo’s *Graces* in a flattering light. Not only are they termed both heavy and clumsy, and thus lacking in requisite grace, but the description of their appearance is confined to a bare half-sentence that comments only on their respective hues, with no comment made on pose, expression or drapery. This economy of expression is so extreme that Diderot’s analysis is once again plunged into ambiguity, as it is only at the end of the sentence that we realise that Diderot has described all three women. The sparseness of Diderot’s style suggests that the philosopher wishes to effect his description as quickly as possible before continuing with his analysis. This, in its turn, implies that Diderot finds so little good in the figures of the Graces that he does not consider it worthwhile to present a complete picture before analysing them.

He proceeds directly to his discussion of the painting’s faults ; the first among these being the matter of hue :

Les brunes piquantes comme nous en connaissons ont les chairs fermes et blanches, mais d’une blancheur sans transparence et sans éclat ; c’est là ce qui les distingue des blondes dont la peau fine, laissant quelquefois apercevoir les veines éparses en filets déliés et se teignant du fluide qui y circule, en reçoit en quelques endroits une nuance bleuâtre. Où est le temps où mes lèvres

suivaient sur la gorge de celle que j'aimais ces traces légères qui portaient des côtés d'une touffe de lis et qui allaient se perdre vers un bouton de rose ? Le peintre n'a pas connu ces beautés. Celle des Grâces qui occupe le milieu de sa composition et qu'on voit de face, a les cheveux châains : ses chairs, son teint, devraient donc participer de la brune et de la blonde ; voilà les éléments de l'art. C'est une longue figure soutenue sur deux longues jambes fluettes (Assézat X : 161).

According to Diderot, Van Loo's portrayal of the skin tones of the three Graces is marred by a poor command of *la vraisemblance poétique*. Diderot claims that in reality, women possess different skin tones according to the colour of their hair. Brunettes, for instance, may be fair-skinned, but their hue lacks the brilliance and transparent nature that characterises the skin of blonde women, whose skin may appear so delicate that one is able to perceive veins beneath the skin. Diderot declares knowledge of such things by virtue of his own erotic experience and presents Van Loo's portrayal of the three Graces as proof that the painter lacks sufficient knowledge of women to accurately translate their beauty to canvas : "Le peintre n'a pas connu ces beautés". Diderot substantiates this claim with an analysis of the female figure in the centre of the painting, whose chestnut hair should render her skin colour a combination of the normal hue of blonds or brunettes : if Van Loo could not find such a woman to model for him, he should have had the skill to accurately imagine her. Diderot, significantly, goes on to call this knowledge of skin tone "les éléments de l'art" ; a term that clearly refers to artistic technique, because it is entirely consistent with Diderot's definition of technique in this *Salon*, discussed above. In his definition of technique, Diderot states that artistic technique consists first in painting according to one's own strengths and weaknesses, and second in appreciating the importance of *la vraisemblance poétique*. In referring to Van Loo's surreal representation of skin tone as "les éléments de l'art", Diderot is stating that Van Loo has attempted a painting that requires skills he does not possess and that in failing to harmoniously translate nature in his work, he has failed to master *la vraisemblance poétique*. These remarks on Diderot's part suggest a new respect and appreciation for technique over ideal.

Diderot continues his analysis of Van Loo's *Les Grâces* with a discussion of the blonde figure:

La blonde et la plus jeune, qui est à gauche, est vraiment informe.  
On sait bien que les contours sont doux dans les femmes, qu'on y  
discerne à peine les muscles et que toutes leurs formes

s'arrondissent ; mais elles ne sont pas rondes et sans inégalité. Un œil expérimenté reconnaîtra dans la femme du plus bel embonpoint les traces des muscles du corps de l'homme ; ces parties sont seulement plus coulantes dans la femme, et leurs limites plus fondues. Au lieu de cette taille élégante et légère qui convenait à son âge, cette Grâce est tout d'une venue. Sans s'entendre beaucoup en proportions, on est choqué du peu de distance de la hanche au-dessous du bras ; mais je ne sais pourquoi je dis de la hanche, car elle n'a point de hanche (Assézat X : 162).

In this discussion of the blonde female figure, Diderot continues to focus on technique by discussing the technical faults of the blonde Grace and by presenting the correct way to draw the female body. Van Loo is accused of being badly trained in the correct portrayal of the proportions of the female figure, notably as regards the form of the blonde Grace. Her shapelessness is referred to twice, first with the adjective "informe" and then with the expression "tout d'une venue", which describes an individual whose body is not accorded much shape by their shoulders, calves or hips. The Grace's shapelessness is reinforced by Diderot's remarks on the strangeness of her proportions, notably by how little distance there appears to be between her hip and arm. Diderot describes this latter point as being obvious even to someone who is unschooled in principles of proportion, for the female form should be drawn with soft, flowing lines and rounded contours. On two occasions, Diderot mentions the muscles below the skin, suggesting an increased artistic knowledge, because Diderot now refers to the fact that to draw the human body well, a certain knowledge of anatomy is required. He equates this artistic knowledge with "un œil expérimenté", showing that he now places value on the constant practice of artistic training. In failing to follow the most basic rules of anatomy in his portrayal of this female figure, Van Loo has committed a transgression in his technique, namely in his ability to paint the human form.

Diderot continues his discussion of technique related to the blonde female figure, particularly as relates to the portrayal of the nude, and the role of drapery. Diderot also makes his first important comment on the imaginative and emotional qualities of *Les Grâces*, namely in Diderot's discussion of the portrayal of the nude :

Et cette guirlande, pourquoi va-t-elle chercher si bêtement les parties que la pudeur ordonne de voiler ? Pourquoi les cache-t-elle si scrupuleusement ? Avec un peu de délicatesse, le peintre eût senti qu'elle manquait son but, si je le devine. Une figure toute nue n'est point indécente. Placez un linge entre la main de la Vénus de Médicis et la partie de son corps que cette main veut me dérober, et vous aurez fait d'une Vénus pudique une Vénus lascive, à moins que ce linge ne descende jusqu'aux pieds de la figure (Assézat X : 162).

Diderot queries the reason for the presence of the “guirlande” to conceal the central figure’s pubic area. This concealment leads Diderot to point out the potential dignity of a nude figure and to accuse Van Loo of a lack of delicacy and good taste in his portrayal of the nude in *Les Grâces*. Diderot demonstrates his point through the example of the *Vénus de Médici*, in which Venus’ hands modestly conceal her breast and pubic area. Diderot claims that if the *Vénus de Médici* were provided with drapery to place between her hands and the parts of her body that are being hidden, this addition would have the effect of making her seem more lascivious, not less, unless the drapery extended to her feet. Diderot’s argument is that the concealment of parts of the body, in an artificial manner, can sometimes have the effect of making a painting seem ridiculous. By employing drapery to conceal the figure of the central Grace, and then placing a garland in the hand of her neighbour, apparently for the same purpose, Van Loo has not employed sufficient imagination to conceive the possibility of this seeming ridiculous. He therefore lacks artistic instinct and a sense of delicacy ; two aspects of painting that, being linked to imagination, are linked to ideal.

Having already discussed the technical elements of scale and proportions and the importance of artistic instinct, which springs from the domain of ideal, Diderot continues his technical analysis of *Les Grâces* with a discussion of Van Loo’s use of colour :

Que vous dirai-je de la couleur générale de ce morceau ? On l’a voulue forte, sans doute, et on l’a faite insupportable. Le ciel est dur ; les terrasses sont d’un vert comme il n’y en a que là. L’artiste peut se vanter de posséder le secret de faire d’une couleur qui est d’elle-même si douce, que la nature qui a réservé le bleu pour les cieux en a tissu le manteau de la terre au printemps, d’en faire, dis-je, une couleur à aveugler, si elle était dans nos campagnes aussi forte que dans son tableau. Vous savez que je n’exagère point, et je défie la meilleure vue de soutenir ce coloris un demi-quart d’heure. Je vous dirai des *Grâces* de Van Loo ce que je vous disais il y a quatre ans de sa *Médée* : c’est un chef-d’œuvre de teinture, et je ne pense pas que l’éloge d’un bon teinturier serait celui d’un bon coloriste (Assézat X : 162).

Diderot’s first and primary concern is that Van Loo intended to make bold use of colour in his painting, but has instead made the colour unbearable to look at and lacking in *vraisemblance*. Indeed, Diderot makes the ironic suggestion that the colour of the sky, as painted in *Les Grâces* would blind people and make it impossible for even the most tolerant observer to contemplate it for more than fifteen minutes. Diderot concludes his reflections on colour by making claims similar to those made about *Jason et Médée* in 1759, namely that while Van

Loo has attempted to translate nature, he has created a colour so vivid that it should only be used by a dyer of cloth.

This thinly-veiled suggestion that Van Loo's poor command of colour should inspire him to renounce art and take up a lay profession is very important in the context of this particular *Salon*, as Diderot here demonstrates the sort of fury about an artist's technique that he has, in previous Salons, only demonstrated about ideal. This highlights Diderot's new recognition in his art criticism of the importance of technique that characterises this *Salon*.

This concentration on artistic method is confirmed by Diderot's claim, at the end of his analysis, that he, Diderot, still has much to learn :

Avec tous ces défauts, je ne serais point étonné qu'un peintre me dît : " Le bel éloge que je ferais de toutes les beautés qui sont dans ce tableau et que vous n'y voyez pas !... " C'est qu'il y a tant de choses qui tiennent au technique et dont il est impossible de juger, sans avoir eu quelque temps le pouce passé dans la palette ! (Assézat X : 162).

In this statement, Diderot expresses his lack of surprise should an artist remark on the beauty of *Les Grâces* ; he acknowledges here his lack of artistic training and avows that only an artist who has had "le pouce passé dans la palette" is able to comment on technical aspects of a painting. This acknowledgement of his inadequacy as an art critic is pivotal and an important step in Diderot's progression towards an acknowledgment of the importance of technique. It tells us that while Diderot has absorbed a great deal of knowledge of the craft on the artist since his first *Salon*, he makes no claim that he has achieved an expert understanding of technique. It is only in the later, longer and more detailed *Salons* of 1765 and 1767 that Diderot's exceptional knowledge of technique will lead him to identify a link between artistic technique and his own first love, artistic ideal. In this *Salon*, Diderot's intense focus on technique has not led him to comment on the connection between technique and ideal, however, this new expression of the importance of technique has led him to stand back from the disproportionate importance he has previously accorded to ideal. The *Salon de 1763* does not, therefore, represent a transition in Diderot's thinking from the autonomy of technique and ideal to their interdependence.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The aims of this chapter on the early *Salons* were numerous : to examine Diderot's ability to distinguish technique from ideal ; to ascertain whether any reflections on the combination of these two concepts are instinctive on Diderot's part, or part of the construction of a methodology of art criticism ; and to determine whether these early *Salons* constitute "building blocks" or stepping stones towards an eventual notion of technique and ideal working together in the creation of great art.

In our analyses of the *Salon de 1759* and the *Salon de 1761*, we have shown that in these years, the notion of a symbiotic relationship between technique and ideal do not appear to exist consciously in Diderot's mind ; with Diderot's own disregard and disdain for technique preventing him from advancement in his art criticism. In our analysis of the *Salon de 1763*, we have shown how this disregard for technique has abated : not so much as to express an awareness of the notion of technique and ideal working together and enriching each other into a concrete methodology of art criticism, but enough for Diderot to acknowledge his own lack of expertise in the field of technique. Our conclusion is that Diderot's acknowledgment of this relationship is not sufficiently evident in any of these early *Salons* for them to constitute "building blocks" for Diderot's future ideas. They are, however, sufficiently detailed to constitute stepping stones towards Diderot's future ideas on the symbiotic relationship between technique and ideal.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE *SALON DE 1765*

#### 4.1 Introduction

It is with the *Salon de 1765* that Diderot definitively constructs from technique and ideal what Lojkin calls “un couple herméneutique” (2009)<sup>73</sup> : a symbiotic combination of two formerly-rival concepts that is intended to facilitate the interpretation of art. By the time he came to write the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot was more confident in his own artistic knowledge than ever before and less prone to modest avowals of his status as a non-artist. His close friendships with artists, most notably, during this period, with the sculptor Falconet, created in Diderot such an affinity for art that the words that he puts in his friend Grimm’s mouth at one point in this *Salon*, “mais mon ami, du train que vous rêvez, savez-vous qu’un seul de vos rêves suffirait pour une galerie entière” (Assézat X : 400) may very well be shamelessly self-flattering, but are not entirely untrue. For Wilson,

Each successive biennial Salon had revealed a Diderot more and more deeply involved in the theory of aesthetics, and more and more familiar with the techniques of artists like Falconet. This increasing involvement manifested itself in the growing amplitude of his *Salons*, that of 1765 being some 85 000 words (1972 : 507).

In the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot makes use of this “amplitude” and of his increased involvement “in the theory of aesthetics” to compose “le couple herméneutique” of technique and ideal that Lojkin defines as “l’opposition de base pour penser et pour évaluer le processus de la création artistique” (2009)<sup>74</sup>. This fact is confirmed by Diderot himself at the very end of the *Salon*, when, while discoursing on the differences between painting and sculpture, Diderot declares : “La peinture se divise en technique et idéale, et l’une et l’autre se sous-divisent en peinture en portrait, peinture de genre et peinture historique. La sculpture comporte à peu près les mêmes divisions” (Assézat X : 423). By placing the difference between technique and ideal on the same level of importance as the hierarchy of genres, Diderot demonstrates the significance of this couple. Diderot does not treat technique and ideal as two opposing concepts, but rather as a “couple”, that is, as two concepts that exist interdependently and that cannot and should not be separated :

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<sup>73</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>74</sup> No page number provided in web document.

Diderot fait indiscutablement du couple technique-idéal le concept fondamental pour penser une poétique de la peinture. Le technique et l'idéal deviennent les deux critères exclusifs du jugement de l'œuvre (Lojkine 2009).

The goal of this chapter is to observe how Diderot constructs this “couple” from the two separate notions of technique and ideal and how he comes to see that they do not exist apart, as he had previously believed, but are interdependent in the creation and interpretation of great art. We will discuss Diderot's construction of the mutually beneficial relationship between technique and ideal through the examination of his analyses of three paintings exhibited at the *Salon de 1765* : Bachelier's *Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile* and *La Charité Romaine*, and Fragonard's *Le Grand Prêtre Corésus s'immole pour sauver Callirhoé*<sup>75</sup>. All three paintings are imperfect, in Diderot's view, whether with respect to technique, or to ideal, or to both. They consequently provide ample opportunity for Diderot to develop and construct “[le] couple technique-idéal” and to apply it in his analyses of these three paintings.

#### **4.2 Bachelier : *Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile***<sup>76</sup>

In his analysis of one of Bachelier's *Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile*, Diderot makes one of this *Salon*'s most vital comments on the importance of technique and ideal working together :

On voit dans un de ces tableaux une femme, le coude appuyé sur une table, où il y a des plumes, de l'encre et du papier. Elle présente une lettre fermée à une esclave debout. L'esclave a de l'humeur, de la mauvaise, s'entend, et non de l'humeur du peintre. Elle ne paraît pas disposée à obéir à la maîtresse. La maîtresse a l'air un peu maussade et l'esclave l'est beaucoup. M. Bachelier, laissez là votre secret et allez remercier M. Chardin qui eut celui de si bien cacher votre tableau que personne que moi ne l'a vu (Assézat X : 294).

In criticising both the portrayal of the slave and the insipid dynamic between this figure and her mistress, Diderot is attacking the painting's figures as well as its subject matter. The portrayal of the mistress and of her slave is strange without being charming. Both appear grumpy, indeed the slave seems to be bristling with disobedience, with no reason given as to why the banal act of handing over and receiving a letter should induce such bad-

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<sup>75</sup> Hereafter called *Corésus et Callirhoé*.

<sup>76</sup> See Appendix 4 (page 203) for full text of article.

temperedness. According to Diderot, the manner in which these two figures are depicted is so strange that no back story, or any concept or idea worth expressing seems to be suggested : “l’esclave a de l’humeur, de la mauvaise, s’entend, et non de l’humeur du peintre”. This last part of the sentence, “et non de l’humeur du peintre”, suggests that the slave has not appeared as Bachelier intended. Diderot’s satirical tone implies that this is not the result of high inspiration, when a painting seems to create itself, but a consequence of Bachelier’s incompetence. The prevailing emotion evoked by this painting is confusion, and that only in the case of viewers who may take the time to be confused. The ineffectiveness of the dynamic between the figures and of their general expression leads Diderot to address Bachelier directly and to advise him to thank Chardin, the artist responsible for curating the *Salon*, for hiding the painting where no one but Diderot could find it. Diderot then gives a more concrete reason for his dislike of this painting by reflecting on the central role that a great idea may play in the conception of a great painting:

Il me semble que quand on prend le pinceau, il faudrait avoir quelque idée forte ingénieuse, délicate ou piquante et se proposer quelque effet, quelque impression. Donner une lettre à porter est une action si commune qu’il faut absolument la relever par quelque circonstance particulière ou par une exécution supérieure (Assézat X : 295).

In these two sentences, Diderot refers first to ideal, and then, almost as an afterthought, and as an entirely separate issue, to its execution. According to Diderot, an artist must have “quelque idée forte ingénieuse” before beginning to paint : the ideal of the painting must come first. It is the only way in which an action as common as handing over a letter may be rendered interesting, apart from the painting of such an ordinary occurrence being executed with superior technique. It is clear that here, Diderot still considers the imaginative and emotional aspects of art, and the methods used to produce them, to be two separate concepts. It is equally clear, in the reflections that follow, that Diderot is still favourable of the former, stating that “Il y a bien peu d’artistes qui aient *des idées*<sup>77</sup> ; et il n’y en a presque pas un seul qui puisse s’en passer” (Assézat X : 295). He does, however, briefly overcome what appears to be his natural bias in favour of ideal by providing the not-insignificant example of Chardin as an exception to this rule :

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<sup>77</sup> Our emphasis.

Oui, sans-doute il est permis à Chardin de montrer une cuisine avec une servante penchée sur son tonneau en rinçant sa vaisselle, mais il faut voir comme l'action de cette servante est vraie, comme son juste dessine le haut de sa figure et comme les plis de ce cotillon dessinent tout ce qui est dessous. Il faut voir la vérité étonnante de tous les ustensiles de ménage et la couleur et l'harmonie de toute la petite composition (Assézat X : 295).

It is permissible, then, for Chardin's work to lack imagination, because the pleasure of contemplating his art resides entirely in what Fried calls his "ability to overcome the triviality of subject matter by virtue of an unprecedented mastery of the means of imitation" (1980 : 74). It is Chardin's proficiency in imitation rather than imagination that is the most important in his work ; an importance that is confirmed by Starobinski : "L'imitation parfaite fait du tableau le double tautologique de la réalité : L'objet n'est plus captive de la figuration, il devient disponible pour la main" (1991 : 219). For Diderot, therefore, Chardin's means of imitating nature are characterised by such perfection of form and by such a deep understanding of colour, harmony and truth that ideal is no longer necessary, because the viewer, when viewing Chardin's work, responds emotionally to technical rather than to imaginative perfection.

Directly after this praise of Chardin's technique, Diderot accuses Bachelier of lacking both imagination and the technical prowess required to diminish the importance of imagination in painting ; he then goes on to state that in the production of art, one may obtain the best results in bringing together "la pensée piquante et l'exécution heureuse".

Point de milieu, ou des idées intéressantes, un sujet original ou un fait étonnant : le mieux serait de réunir les deux, et la pensée piquante et l'exécution heureuse. Si le sublime du technique n'y était pas, l'idéal de Chardin serait misérable. Retenez bien cela, M. Bachelier (Assézat X : 295).

"La pensée piquante" refers to the passions inspired by the ideas a painting expresses ; "l'exécution heureuse" to its execution. Technique and ideal, these two important, but up until now considered as two autonomous aspects of art, must, he states, be united. Diderot confirms this fact by his final, most vital statement that "Si le sublime du technique n'y était pas, l'idéal de Chardin serait misérable". If Chardin did not have such a superior mastery of technique, he would not be able to produce such perfect ideal ; nobody would be interested in a subject so mundane as a servant washing dishes if the execution of the subject matter were

not so perfect. In making this observation on Chardin, Diderot confirms his conviction that ideal and technique should work together to create great art.

#### 4.3 Bachelier : *La Charité Romaine*<sup>78</sup>

Diderot's statement, discussed above, that the grand idea of each painting and the tools used to express it must work together in order to produce great art, is vital to our argument that the *Salon de 1765* represents Diderot's first bringing-together of technique and ideal as "un couple herméneutique" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>79</sup>. It is therefore necessary to establish that this statement in Diderot's analysis of Bachelier's *Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile* is not an isolated one that cannot characterise the *Salon* as a whole, but rather a theory that he employs thereafter, elsewhere in this *Salon*. To this end, we will examine Diderot's analysis of another of Bachelier's works, *La Charité Romaine*.

Diderot's opinion of Bachelier has not changed since we last examined it in the *Salon de 1759* (probably because the artist's father-in-law, Boucher, had not changed either, be it in his subject matter or in his style). In Diderot's introduction to *La Charité Romaine*, he mocks Bachelier's work, invoking, for instance, the latter's 1759 painting of Christ, and making the humorous statement that the Saviour must be "bien malheureux de retomber entre vos mains au sortir de celles des Juifs" (Assézat X : 290). Diderot addresses these scornful remarks directly to Bachelier, thus showing a lack of restraint in the expression of this opinion. Diderot also reiterates his disdain for Bachelier's penchant for still life painting, thus suggesting that Diderot, at this point, still believes in the superiority of history painting and the inferiority of almost every other genre : "vous vous êtes assez vainement tourmenté : que ne revenez-vous à vos fleurs et à vos animaux" (Assézat X : 290).

*La Charité Romaine* portrays a scene, lighted by a single window, of a woman breastfeeding an old man in prison. Although the subject matter is pathetic, Diderot does not consider the two principal figures to be evocative of any kind of emotion :

Ce jour a placé la tête de cette femme dans la demi-teinte ou dans l'ombre. L'artiste a eu beau se tourmenter, se désespérer, sa tête est devenue ronde et noirâtre, couleur et forme qui, jointes à un nez aquilin ou droit, lui donnent la physionomie bizarre de l'enfant d'une Mexicaine qui a couché avec un Européen et où les

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<sup>78</sup> See Appendix 4 (page 204) for full text of article.

<sup>79</sup> No page number provided in web document.

traits caractéristiques des deux nations sont brouillés (Assézat X : 291).

Diderot dislikes both the woman's form and hue, suggesting that her round, swarthy head, in strange concert with her aquiline nose, gives her "la physionomie bizarre de l'enfant d'une Mexicaine qui a couché avec un Européen et où les traits caractéristiques des deux nations sont brouillés". Diderot's flippant and somewhat vulgar humour ; his choice of words in stating that the woman looks half-Mexican, half-European and therefore "bizarre" ; his ironic use of the word "brouiller" when describing the *métissage* of Mexican and European features ; all of these are intended to detach us emotionally from the female figure and to make her an object of ridicule.

The criticism of the figure of the old man is just as negative :

Vous avez voulu que votre vieillard fût maigre, sec et décharné, moribond ; et vous l'avez rendu hideux à faire peur. La touche extrêmement dure de sa tête, ces os prominents, ce front étroit, cette barbe hérissée lui ôtent la figure humaine ; son cou ses bras ses jambes ont beau réclamer, on le prend pour un monstre, pour l'hyène, pour tout ce qu'on veut excepté pour un homme. Et cette femme, qui demandait à Duclos, le secrétaire de l'académie quelle bête c'était là ne voyait point mal. Pour la couleur et le dessin si c'était l'imitation d'un grand pain-d'épice ce serait un chef-d'œuvre (Assézat X : 291).

Diderot's diction in this extract, which is still characterised by a hyperbolic tone, has the effect of dehumanising the figure of the old man, which is, according to Diderot, what Bachelier has done by giving this figure such a monstrous form. The words used by Diderot to describe the old man's features and body are very negative : the male figure is labelled "extrêmement dure", "étroit", and most strikingly of all, his beard is "hérissée", an adjective used usually in relation to an animal. Diderot's choice of words dehumanises the old man, not simply in Diderot's view, but in the viewer's as well : Diderot equates the figure with a monster, a hyena, a scavenger. This commentary expresses not only Diderot's dissatisfaction with the rendition of the figure of the old man, but also with Bachelier's poor treatment of the subject matter which was meant to arouse compassion, not horror. Diderot goes on to relate an anecdote which shows his readers that his reaction to the painting is in fact shared by others : a woman at the Salon, within his hearing, puts the following question to the secretary of the Academy : "quelle bête c'était là". Diderot then goes on to state that this Salon-goer is not wrong in her estimation and sarcastically observes that the painting would be a

masterpiece of colour and form if it depicted a large piece of gingerbread rather than two human beings. In making this comparison Diderot subjects the painting to further ridicule ; emphasising at once its triviality and its inability to move the viewer. The way that Bachelier has painted the two figures is so inadequate that it has completely alienated the viewer emotionally. If the two figures had been drawn in a way more representative of human beings, and not so much as “[des bêtes]” “[des monstres]” and “[des hyènes]”, they may very well have inspired the fervour of those attending the *Salon*. It is technique then, in Diderot’s critical analysis of Bachelier’s *La Charité Romaine*, that dominates, and, perhaps most significantly, it is poor technique that is the direct cause of poor ideal. Here, Diderot brings the two concepts together, suggesting that they are interdependent rather than autonomous.

Diderot continues his commentary of *La Charité Romaine* with a brief, if slightly more detailed analysis on the painting’s formal failings :

Pour votre femme, le bras en est mal dessiné ; le raccourci ne s’en sent pas ; ses mains sont mesquines ; celle qui soutient la tête ne se discerne point ; et ce genou, sur lequel la tête de votre vilaine bête humaine est posée, d’où vient-il ? À qui appartient-il ? Vous ne savez pas seulement imiter le fer car la chaîne qui attache cet homme n’en est pas (Assézat X : 292).

The woman’s arm is described as being poorly drawn to the point of her hands being called “mesquines”, small and miserly rather than expressive of the nurturing generosity of her gesture : Bachelier’s inability to accurately draw the human form has sabotaged any positive emotional response that may still exist in the viewer. This is further demonstrated by Diderot’s fury at how the knee on which the old man rests his head is depicted, as it does not appear to possess an owner. It does not clearly belong to the woman or to the old man, but simply exists in the middle of the painting. This leaves the viewer wondering what purpose the disembodied knee serves and alienates him emotionally, as the artist’s poor portrayal of his subject matter cannot inspire the viewer’s pity or compassion. Diderot, seemingly resigned to Bachelier’s failure to paint human beings convincingly, casts about for any well-painted non-human content in *La Charité Romaine* and observes that the artist has failed there as well, since the old man’s iron chains are executed with so little realism that they do not appear to be made of iron at all. Bachelier has therefore failed, according to Diderot, to paint any part of this painting convincingly, or poignantly.

With *La Charité Romaine*, Bachelier demonstrates so little mastery of technique that this deficiency has a negative effect on his command of ideal. If his technique had been sounder, his ideal would have been more effective, and the viewer might very well have felt some emotion when looking at the painting. Insufficient technique has therefore seriously compromised ideal ; with Diderot's analysis of *La Charité Romaine* showing that in this *Salon*, Diderot comes to think of technique and ideal as being two concepts which are symbiotic in the creation of great art.

#### **4.4 Fragonard : *Le Grand Prêtre Corésus s'immole pour sauver Callirhoé***<sup>80</sup>

*Corésus et Callirhoé* is a relatively unknown Greek myth in which a young woman, Callirhoé, rebuffs the advances of Corésus, a priest of the god Bacchus. As a punishment for her impertinence, Bacchus sends Callirhoé's people into a state of collective Bacchic frenzy (Fried 1980 : 143) and lets it be known that this will only cease should she consent to be sacrificed, or should another person volunteer in her place. Callirhoé escapes her fate when Corésus, unable to bear the idea of sacrificing the woman he loves, turns the sacrificial knife on himself.

Fragonard's depiction of this myth was one of the most popular paintings at the *Salon de 1765*, and it is exceptional in a variety of ways. To begin with, it is unique in Fragonard's body of work in that it is a history painting, and does not at all resemble the flowery Rococo dreamscapes for which he was to become famous. Fragonard undertook this uncharacteristic foray into history painting in order to gain entry into the Académie as a history painter rather than a genre painter, but this does not detract from the sensation the painting caused in Paris.

Fragonard est agréé le 30 mars, “avec applaudissements” selon Wille [Duplessis 1852 : 284-285], “avec une unanimité et un applaudissement dont il y a peu d'exemple”, selon Marigny [Furcy-Raynaud 1903, 1904 : 77]. Cochin, secrétaire de l'Académie, propose de faire acheter le tableau par le roi, pour qu'il soit tissé aux Gobelins, et de commander au jeune peintre un pendant. L'atelier laissé vacant au Louvre par la mort de Deshays lui sera attribué de préférence à Brenet et à Lépicié, au mépris de la hiérarchie et de l'ancienneté. C'est dire à quel point l'apparition du *Corésus et Callirhoé* de Fragonard sur la scène parisienne fut un événement (Lojkine n.d)<sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> See Appendix 4 (page 206) for full text of article.

<sup>81</sup> No page number provided in web document.



Despite *Corésus et Callirhoé*'s initial popularity, public enthusiasm for it waned very quickly. Diderot discusses this fall from grace in the introduction to his criticism of the painting :

Il m'est impossible, mon ami, de vous entretenir de ce tableau. Vous savez qu'il n'était plus au Salon, lorsque la sensation générale qu'il fit m'y appela. C'est votre affaire que d'en rendre compte. Nous en causerons ensemble. Cela sera d'autant mieux, que peut-être découvrirons-nous pourquoi, après un premier tribut d'éloges payé à l'artiste, après les premières exclamations, le public a semblé se refroidir. Toute composition, dont le succès ne se soutient pas, manque d'un vrai mérite (Assézat X : 398).

Despite this inauspicious start, crowned by a belief that art is only great if it is capable of sustaining interest, Diderot's commentary of *Corésus et Callirhoé* is both enthusiastic and highly creative as a literary work. It begins with a confession to Grimm that he has not been able to see *Corésus et Callirhoé* at the *Salon*, and will therefore substitute his analysis with the story of a dream he has had after reading Book VII of Plato's *Republic* before bed. In this bizarre dream, which Diderot entitles "L'antre de Platon" in deference to its origins, the philosopher is chained to a wall in a dark cave with a number of other people. Each individual's head is held firmly in place by a wooden splint so that they cannot turn away from the projections of a lantern onto a large screen, positioned in front of them. The images produced by this lantern, enhanced by voice artists standing behind the screen, are described as being so evocative of the real world that the captives come to see the illusions produced by the lantern as reality. The images projected onto the screen are *tableaux dramatiques*, and yet are more than that. They create flux, firstly because a series of *tableaux* is presented rather than a single *tableau*, secondly because each *tableau* is itself in a state of flux (Lojkin n.d)<sup>82</sup> ; its figures interacting with and talking to each other. This heightens the sense of reality afforded by each *tableau* and makes it easier for the captives in the cave to believe that each *tableau* they see is real ; this despite the obvious presence of several despotic personages who stand behind the prisoners and threaten them with punishment should they turn around to face the lantern. But the prisoners have little desire to acknowledge the lie of what they see before them. They are moved to laughter, or to tears by the various *tableaux dramatiques* that appear on the screen, and do not seem to be opposed to, or even aware of their own imprisonment as they blame, ostracise and ridicule any of their number who attempt to break free.

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<sup>82</sup> No page number provided in web document.

It is this dream in the form of a series of *tableaux* concerned with the story of *Corésus et Callirhoé* that Diderot chooses to share with Grimm ; presenting it as a drama in five acts (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 212) within the structure of an imagined dialogue with Grimm (Fried 1980 : 142) and substituting a critique of the painting with a detailed description of this drama's most poignant *tableau* : the suicide of Corésus in the temple of Bacchus, as seen in Diderot's "dream". The philosopher's presentation of this painting as a *tableau dramatique* serves, therefore, as an equivalent of the painting itself and creates a *mise en abyme* in which the screen in the cave creates the *tableau dramatique* of *Corésus et Callirhoé*. The *tableau dramatique*, in its own turn, creates the space in which the story will take place, while the dialogue structures that space and thus enables art criticism to take place. (Lojkine n.d)<sup>83</sup>.

There are two reasons for Diderot's choosing to present his analysis of *Corésus et Callirhoé* within the framework of a *tableau dramatique*. The first is that a *tableau dramatique* echoes the composition of the painting itself : Fragonard presents *Corésus et Callirhoé* as though it were a scene from a play, its temple serving as a stage for the drama taking place (Lojkine n.d)<sup>84</sup>. Fragonard may have chosen to depict the painting in this way because Destouche's 1712 opera *Callirhoé* and its libretto by Roy, were the last time the Parisian public had encountered the story of *Corésus et Callirhoé* in the domain of the arts (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 212). Diderot's second, and most practical reason to present his description of *Corésus et Callirhoé* as a *tableau dramatique*, was the nature of the *Correspondance Littéraire* itself : a magazine read by foreign subscribers who had no possibility of attending the *Salons* themselves. Diderot was keenly conscious of this fact, and wished to provide his readers with the most accurate and complete impression possible of the works on display. His first instinct had been to exhaustively describe the paintings that were, for him, the most significant of any particular *Salon*<sup>85</sup>. He had quickly learned to disregard this instinct, however, as it became clear that the reader, buried beneath an avalanche of detail, found this method an impediment, rather than an aid, to envisioning a work's completeness, particularly in paintings with many figures and a strong sense of emotion, atmosphere and expression. It was following this realisation that Diderot began to question, more than any other art critic of his time, the problem of *ekphrasis*, or the written word's

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<sup>83</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>84</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>85</sup> The least significant were often dignified with a single sentence.

capacity to reproduce the full impact of what Bukdahl calls “une représentation nuancée d’une totalité créée à l’aide d’un tout autre langage, à savoir le langage des formes” (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 211-212). Bukdahl’s use of the word “langage” to describe the different media of writing and of painting is significant, as it presents Diderot’s *Salons*, or indeed all art criticism, as a form of poetic translation in which “translating” painting to a written form is equal in difficulty to translating the poetry of one language into the poetry of another. In the *Salons*, Diderot had encountered and attempted to resolve this problem before : his transformation of *L’Accordée du Village* into a *tableau dramatique* in lieu of a critique, in the *Salon de 1763*<sup>86</sup> is proof of this. It is only in the *Salons* of 1765 and 1767, however, that he possessed both the technical knowledge and the experience to properly seek a resolution to the problem of *ekphrasis* through what Bukdahl calls “la technique de la traduction poétique”. This technique of poetic translation entailed the following: “traduire ou (...) recréer l’univers artistique en adoptant des procédés stylistiques comparables, sur le plan littéraire, à ceux du peintre” (Bukdahl 1984 in Angrémy *et al.* 1984 : 211-212). Diderot’s plan is therefore to use literary techniques to write his critical analysis of a painting, so that they may echo the complex artistic techniques that the artist has used to create the painting. Diderot’s unconventional description of *Corésus et Callirhoé* in the *Salon de 1765* is therefore intended to be a direct “translation” and equivalent emotional experience of seeing *Corésus et Callirhoé* hanging on the wall of the *Salon* ; a “translation” born of years of experimenting with ways to convey a painting’s essence to a person who would never see it. In writing a description of *Corésus et Callirhoé* as a drama, Diderot is able to capture the rich sense of movement and the menacing atmosphere that Fragonard achieves through his command of *chiaroscuro*, through his choice of palette, and through his mastery of line. Diderot is also able to pay the necessary attention to the physiognomy of the different figures and to the horror and compassion that may be discerned in every line of their bodies and faces. In this way, the reader engaging with Diderot’s “traduction poétique” of *Corésus et Callirhoé* will ultimately possess all knowledge of the painting that is necessary to achieving a full vision and understanding of it, without ever having to see it.

In addition to Diderot’s reason for the employment of *tableaux dramatiques* in the critiquing of *Corésus et Callirhoé*, there is also a distinct logic behind the decision to place the narrative told by the *tableaux dramatiques* within the structure of a dialogue with Grimm. As has already been stated, Diderot’s presentation of *Corésus et Callirhoé* through imagined

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<sup>86</sup> See Chapter 3.

*tableaux dramatiques* puts the painting into a state of flux ; this because the scenes projected onto the wall of *L'antre de Platon* are subject to constant change. While this is a highly creative way of critiquing a work of art, it is also risky. Without a concrete structure within which to contain this flux, Diderot's critique of Fragonard also risks being subject to constant change. It is for this reason that Diderot places the dreamscape of *L'antre de Platon* within the structure of a dialogue with Grimm :

Il est remarquable que le discours diderotien devient dialogue : c'est à Grimm, l'interlocuteur distancié, mais peut-être aussi victime de l'illusion, qu'il revient de circonscrire les limites des tableaux, de découper dans le flux des images des unités séquentielles discrètes. Grimm narrativise le flux iconique ; en le ponctuant, il le rend d'une certaine façon lisible (...) Les images projetées sur la toile de la caverne fonctionnent donc comme des éléments narratifs, ou plus exactement des scènes indirectes disposées autour d'un centre absent, le tableau de Fragonard, qui, au début du texte, fait défaut, et, à sa fin, doit être supplée (...) Mais la dimension scopique ne se révèle pleinement que lorsque de la disposition, on passe à l'effet : "Grimm : Voilà le tableau de Fragonard, le voilà avec tout son effet". L'effet caractérise le moment de la cristallisation scopique, lorsque le flux des images se fixe dans une disposition stable (Lojkine n.d.)<sup>87</sup>.

The dialogue with Grimm serves as a discreet interruption of the flux created by the *tableaux dramatiques*, and divides Diderot's critique of Fragonard into sequences. Such division is necessary, because the scene projected onto the wall of *L'antre de Platon* comprises "des éléments narratifs, ou plus exactement des scènes indirectes disposées autour d'un centre absent". In making use of a dialectic structure to compensate for the lack of a concrete, narrative centre in his critique of Fragonard, Diderot facilitates both the reading and the interpretation of that critique.

Another important function served by the dialogue with Grimm is to evoke the "dimension scopique" of Diderot's critique of Fragonard. The "dimension scopique" of the critique of *Corésus et Callirhoé*, or the dialectic between looking and being looked at that takes place within it (Dictionnaire Cordial n.d.)<sup>88</sup>, can only be brought into effect if the viewer ceases to look at the physical layout of the scenes projected onto the cave wall and begins to appreciate the effect of the scene. This is made possible by the dialogue between Grimm and Diderot, in which the two men discuss the effect of the painting in detail. Therefore, by using Diderot

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<sup>87</sup> No page number provided in web document.

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and Grimm's dialogue to evoke the "dimension scopique" of the painting, the *tableaux dramatiques* being projected onto the cave wall move out of a state of flux, and become stable, thus allowing for a more effective criticism of their qualities.

It is testament to the superiority of Fragonard's ideal that the painting is sufficiently inspiring to make Diderot create from it such a remarkable reconstitution, or "set piece", as Fried calls it, before ending his analysis with the remark that "la partie idéale est sublime dans cet artiste, à qui il ne manque qu'une couleur plus vraie et une perfection technique, que le temps et l'expérience peuvent lui donner" (Assézat X : 406-407). Diderot therefore believes that Fragonard needs to acquire more technical experience in order to improve his work, which is already of a very high standard in terms of ideal. In our analysis of *Corésus et Callirhoé*, this remark will be used as a starting point to determine whether Diderot's analysis of *Corésus et Callirhoé* leads him to conclude that technique and ideal have a symbiotic relationship in the production of great art. Our argument will be put forward in three stages. First, we will establish why Diderot believes that Fragonard's ideal is "sublime". Second, we will examine Diderot's remarks on Fragonard's technique. Third, we will examine Diderot's conclusions as to whether Fragonard's lack of technique detracts from his "sublime" ideal.

#### 4.4.1 Fragonard and Ideal

In this section we will attempt to establish Diderot's reasons for calling Fragonard's ideal "sublime" by examining Diderot's imagining of the painting's setting, first in the build-up to Corésus taking his own life ; second in the actual moment of Corésus' suicide.

Diderot's description of the setting of the painting is highly atmospheric and is intended to reflect the mood of the painting itself :

Le ciel brillait de la clarté la plus pure. Le soleil semble précipiter toute la masse de sa lumière dans le temple et se plaire à la rassembler sur la victime lorsque les voûtes s'obscurcissent de ténèbres épaisses qui s'étendant sur nos têtes, et se mêlant à l'air à la lumière produisirent une horreur soudaine. À travers ces ténèbres je vis planer un génie infernal ; je le vis. Des yeux hagards lui sortaient de la tête. Il tenait un poignard d'une main de l'autre il secouait une torche ardente. Il criait. C'était le Désespoir ; et l'Amour, le redoutable Amour, était porté sur son dos (Assézat X : 403).

Diderot speaks of how the light of the sun seems to take pleasure in blazing into the temple to shine on the victim, before becoming corrupted by "de ténèbres épaisses qui s'étendant sur

nos têtes”. The word “épaisses” evokes the density and the darkness of the shadows, which, in meeting the light, produce “une horreur soudaine (...) un génie infernal” ; a creature that seems to be born from the meeting of darkness and light. This effect of brilliant light swallowed up by shadow has a double purpose, according to Lojkiné :

Diderot commence par évoquer la lumière : le point focal de la représentation, où elle vient se concentrer, est la poitrine de Callirhoé, ou plus exactement chez Fragonard son téton gauche dénudé (...). La lumière et donc l’œil du spectateur se précipitent, se rassemblent vers ce téton, l’objet du désir, au moment où l’action véritable de la scène se trame plus haut, dans le renoncement à cet objet.

L’allégorie de l’action précède celle-ci : Diderot décrit le génie du Désespoir, qui annonce le suicide de Corésus, accompagné d’un Cupidon vengeur, qui en donne la cause. L’allégorie envahit l’espace scénique au moment où la lumière se retire (Lojkiné n.d.<sup>89</sup>).

The light in the painting provides a focal point which makes the viewer concentrate first on the vulnerable object of the Bacchic priest’s desire, Callirhoé, and the part of her body into which the sacrificial knife will be plunged. This emphasis on the means of her destruction elicits the viewer’s pity and distracts him from “le génie du Désespoir” and the “Cupidon vengeur” that are present to declare Corésus’ suicide. These spirits have two functions, according to Diderot. The first is to ensure, through their subtle presence, that Corésus’ destruction of himself is all the more shocking when it occurs. Their second purpose is to serve as allegories for the desperation and vengeful love that are experienced by figures in the painting, and that overwhelm the viewer at the moment of Corésus’ death. The viewer’s heightened emotional state is deepened by the sudden disappearance of light at this critical juncture. Fragonard’s choice of content in the setting of *Corésus et Callirhoé*, from the positioning of the ray of light and the clouds of darkness, to the presence of the two spirits, is intended to move the viewer and excite his pity and horror. Both content and emotion being the province of ideal, and both having worked together in the painting’s setting to create a highly-emotional and highly-atmospheric *tableau*, we may conclude that for Diderot, Fragonard’s setting of *Corésus et Callirhoé* in the build-up to Corésus taking his own life is accomplished with great attention to the imaginative and expressive qualities of the painting.

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<sup>89</sup> No page number provided in web document.

Having established that Fragonard shows superior ideal in the painting's setting, it is now necessary to establish whether or not, for Diderot, the artist demonstrates a similarly prodigious command of ideal at the actual moment that Corésus takes his own life :

À l'instant le grand-prêtre tire le couteau sacré ; il lève le bras ; je crois qu'il va frapper la victime ; qu'il va l'enfoncer dans le sein de celle qui l'a dédaignée et que le ciel lui a livrée. Point du tout ; il s'en frappe lui-même. Un cri général perce et déchire l'air. Je vois la mort et ses symptômes errer sur les joues sur le front du tendre et généreux infortuné ; ses genoux défaillent, sa tête retombe en arrière, un de ses bras est pendant, la main dont il a saisi le couteau le tient encore enfoncé dans son cœur. Tous les regards s'attachent ou craignent de s'attacher sur lui. Tout marque la peine et l'effroi. L'acolyte qui est au pied du candélabre a la bouche entr'ouverte et regarde avec effroi. Celui qui soutient la victime retourne la tête et regarde avec effroi. Celui qui tient le bassin funeste relève ses yeux effrayés. Le visage et les bras tendus de celui qui me parut si beau montrent toute sa douleur et tout son effroi. Ces deux prêtres âgés dont les regards cruels ont dû se repaître si souvent de la vapeur du sang dont ils ont arrosé les autels n'ont pu se refuser à la douleur à la commisération à l'effroi ; ils plaignent le malheureux, ils souffrent, ils sont effrayés. Cette femme seule appuyée contre une des colonnes saisies d'horreur et d'effroi s'est retournée subitement et cette autre, qui avait le dos contre une borne s'est renversée en arrière, une de ses mains s'est portée sur ses yeux, et son autre bras semble repousser d'elle ce spectacle effrayant. La surprise et l'effroi sont peints sur les visages des spectateurs éloignés d'elle. Mais rien n'égale la consternation et la douleur du vieillard aux cheveux gris. Ses cheveux se sont dressés sur son front, je crois le voir encore, la lumière du brasier ardent l'éclairant, et ses bras étendus au-dessus de l'autel. Je vois ses yeux je vois sa bouche je le vois s'élancer. J'entends ses cris, ils me réveillent. La toile se replie et la caverne disparaît (Assézat X : 403-404).

An analysis of Diderot's diction in the above description of the moment of the suicide shows the emotion that this scene evokes in him. The "cri général" does not sound in the air, or even ring in the air : "un cri général *perce* et *déchire* l'air"<sup>90</sup> : the air is pierced and torn like a cloth; like flesh. The description of the dying priest is vivid and charged with pity : he is described as a "tendre et généreux infortuné". Corésus' hand holds the knife which is not *pushed* into his *chest* (Callirhoé is only ever described as having a chest or breast : "poitrine" or "sein"), but *sunk*, or *thrust* into his *heart* ; the seat of his emotions. Just as Corésus thrusts

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<sup>90</sup> Our emphasis.

a knife into his own heart, and provokes a “cri général” in the figures in the painting, the sight of the suicide, says Diderot, elicits a similar cry in the viewer :

Les regards des spectateurs internes, dans la toile, préfigurent le regard du spectateur externe, sur la toile. Ils regardent et ils ne regardent pas. Ils se jettent en avant et ils se rejettent en arrière. Tous sont marqués par l’ambivalence de l’abject, dont Julia Kristeva a montré, dans *Pouvoir de l’horreur*, qu’elle formait un couple fascination/abjection où la précipitation sans distance vers la chose et le détour horrifié ne constituaient que l’avvers et le revers d’une même appréhension, que ne délimite, ne circonscrit, aucun sujet séparé, aucun objet distinct.

On comprend dès lors que si l’ensemble du texte se construit comme représentation d’un défaut et instauration d’un supplément, c’est que le tableau thématise très profondément cette insoutenable défaillance intime par laquelle se noue le jeu de l’abject, qu’il borde de sublime ce trou abject dans la représentation (Lojkine n.d.<sup>91</sup>).

All the figures in *Corésus et Callirhoé* experience this “ambivalence de l’abject” ; this “[avers et (...) revers] d’une même appréhension” ; this “insoutenable défaillance intime par laquelle se noue le jeu de l’abject” : the desire to look at horror, and the horror that stops us from doing so. This condition is explored in detail by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror : An Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva’s theory of the abject being particularly relevant to Diderot’s critique of this painting, we will make use of her commentary on “le couple fascination/abjection” and the nature of abjection itself as a framework for our textual analysis of Diderot’s description of the immediate aftermath of Corésus’ suicide.

What Kristeva calls “le jeu de l’abject” is consistent with what the figures in *Corésus et Callirhoé* are experiencing at the moment of the high priest’s suicide. It is also relevant to what Diderot himself purports to experience while observing Corésus’ suicide. According to Kristeva :

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside ; sickened, it rejects. A certainty

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<sup>91</sup> No page number provided in web document.



protects it from the shameful – certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself (Kristeva 1982 : 1).

This commentary on the nature of abjection evokes the “violent, dark revolt of being” against the suicide of Corésus suffered by the figures in Fragonard’s painting. The suicide is “a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside” that lies beyond the realm of “the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” : Corésus has acted in a way that should be impossible in his world, for the simple reason that suicide is as intolerable and as unthinkable as his passion for his victim to whom he, like the brutal old men in the painting, should be entirely indifferent. For the figures in the painting, Corésus’ suicide is an act both touching and horrific from which they seek to turn away : “tous les regards s’attachent ou craignent de s’attacher sur lui”. There is a woman in the painting, “qui avait le dos contre une borne” whose arm seems to “repousser d’elle ce spectacle effrayant” : “Apprehensive, desire turns aside ; sickened, it rejects”. Nevertheless, many of the figures in *Corésus et Callirhoé* are utterly unlike this woman, in that they cannot stop themselves from observing these acts of horror. For example, the acolyte “au pied du candelabre” has “la bouche entr’ouverte et regarde avec effroi ”. A second acolyte, supporting Callirhoé, “regarde avec effroi”. The third acolyte, who carries the bowl used to catch the blood of victims, “relève ses yeux effrayés”. The verb “relèver” suggests that the acolyte had first turned his eyes away, obeying his instinct to turn away from a sight dreadful to the eyes. Now, however, he turns his eyes on Corésus once again, yielding to an instinct that is no less powerful. Kristeva writes :

But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself (1982 : 3).

Human beings are helpless to escape the impulse that draws them “toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned” ; this impulse creating “a vortex of summons and repulsion [that] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself”. That the figures in *Corésus et Callirhoé* are beside themselves is demonstrated by Diderot’s constant repetition, in this part of his analysis, of the word “effroi” ; a word that is particularly charged with the emotion and the poetry of the horror that it expresses. Diderot’s repetition of “effroi”, nine times within

the space of fourteen lines, heightens the sense of shock and fear that he seeks to evoke and works as a communal, racing heartbeat that is shared by the figures in the painting, by the viewer, and by Diderot himself (Lojkin n.d.<sup>92</sup>). This “heartbeat” has its origins in the abject ; in the desire to look and not to look that renders all those caught in its trap “beside [themselves]”.

As Lojkin contends, the passions that the painting inspires are so powerful that they impact both on figures in the painting and on the viewer looking at the painting. This characteristic makes *Corésus et Callirhoé* a painting grounded in the overwhelming success and artistry of its ideal, as Diderot himself contends at the very end of his critique : “la partie idéale est sublime dans cet artiste”.

#### 4.4.2 Fragonard and Technique

Diderot’s comments on Fragonard’s technique, (which he relates in the *Salon* as spoken by Grimm), occur just after “Grimm” informs Diderot that the philosopher’s dream and Fragonard’s painting are identical :

DIDEROT

Ce que vous me dites me ferait presque croire que moi qui n’y crois pas pendant le jour je suis en commerce avec lui pendant la nuit. Mais l’instant effroyable de mon rêve, celui où le sacrificateur s’enfonce le poignard dans le sein, est donc celui que Fragonard a choisi ?

GRIMM

Assurément. Nous avons seulement, observé dans le tableau que les vêtements du grand-prêtre tenaient un peu trop de ceux d’une femme.

DIDEROT

Attendez. Mais c’est comme dans mon rêve.

GRIMM

Que ces jeunes acolytes tout nobles, tout charmants qu’ils étaient, étaient d’un sexe indéci, des espèces d’hermaphrodites.

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<sup>92</sup> No page number provided in web document.

DIDEROT

C'est encore comme dans mon rêve.

GRIMM

Que la victime bien couchée, bien tombée, était peut-être un peu trop étroitement serrée d'en bas par ses vêtements.

DIDEROT

Je l'ai aussi remarqué dans mon rêve mais je lui faisais un mérite d'être décente même dans ce moment.

GRIMM

Que sa tête faible de couleur, peu expressive, sans teintes, sans passages était plutôt celle d'une femme qui sommeille que d'une femme qui s'évanouit.

DIDEROT

Je l'ai rêvé avec ces défauts (Assézat X : 406-407).

The “défauts” that Diderot identifies through his alter-ego Grimm, are all linked to the realism, or lack thereof, in the portrayal of certain objects and figures depicted in the painting. Diderot speaks first of all of Corésus' robes, which resemble those that might belong to a woman. This diminishes the emotional impact of the painting, as the appearance of feminine-looking robes on Corésus emasculates both him and the nobility of his actions ; a strong priest saving a weak female being considered infinitely nobler than the same action performed by an effeminate male.

The second technical problem that Diderot/Grimm identifies is also connected to masculinity. The acolytes in the painting are portrayed as being of “[un] sexe indécis, des espèces d'hermaphrodites” ; this despite their beauty of form. It is suggested that the androgyny of the acolytes undermines the viewer's capacity to respond to *Corésus et Callirhoé* with pity and compassion, as trying to guess the sex of the acolytes will distract viewers from the noble sentiments that the painting is meant to inspire.

The third problem recognised by Diderot/Grimm is arguably the most important of the three, as it has the potential to sabotage any poignancy that the painting may possess. According to Diderot, Callirhoé's knees appear to be buckling not so much because of her imminent death, but because her clothes are too tight around her legs. Her apparent inattention to the gravity of her fate is further emphasised by the feebleness of her head, which, by virtue of poor colour and of muted expression, more closely resembles that of a sleeping woman than a fainting one. The head is the most important part of the figure of Callirhoé, or indeed of any figure at all, as it is the most expressive of a figure's psychological state. Painting the head in a way that is indistinct, impassive and suggestive of sleeping rather than fainting, does harm to how her body language is interpreted by the viewer. The difference between sleeping and fainting is vital. Callirhoé is fainting out of fear and despair because she is about to be sacrificed. Sleep is achieved through peace of mind or exhaustion ; two emotional states that are distinct from Callirhoé's. In demonstrating such little mastery of colour and expression in the painting of Callirhoé's face, Fragonard has impeded the viewer's capacity to be drawn into the painting and to respond to it with empathy.

All three of these technical errors identified by Diderot – Coréus's masculine robes, the androgyny of the acolytes and the questionable realism of certain parts of Callirhoé's figure – all have an impact on the emotional value of *Coréus et Callirhoé*, and therefore on its ideal. Diderot, however, does not definitively state this until he has once again re-iterated the overwhelming *pathos* of the painting and has refused to allow that the problems of technique he has identified detract from this *pathos* :

#### GRIMM

(...) Les têtes des vieillards nous ont paru faites d'humeur et marquant bien la surprise et l'effroi ; les génies, bien furieux, bien aériens ; et la vapeur noire qu'ils amenaient avec eux, bien éparse et ajoutant un terrible étonnant à la scène ; les masses d'ombre relevant de la manière la plus forte et la plus piquante la splendeur éblouissante des éclairs ; et puis un intérêt unique. De quelque côté qu'on portât les yeux, on rencontrait l'effroi ; il était dans tous les personnages ; il s'élançait du grand-prêtre ; il se répandait, il s'accroissait par les deux génies, par la vapeur obscure qui les accompagnait, par la sombre lueur des brasiers. Il était impossible de refuser son âme à une impression si répétée : C'était comme dans les émeutes populaires, où la passion du grand nombre nous saisit avant même que le motif en soit connu. Mais outre la crainte qu'au premier signe de croix tous ces beaux simulacres ne disparussent, il y a des juges d'un goût sévère, qui

ont cru sentir dans toute la composition je ne sais quoi de théâtral qui leur a déplu. Quoi qu'ils en disent, croyez que vous avez fait un beau rêve et Fragonard un beau tableau. Il a toute la magie, toute l'intelligence et toute la machine pittoresque. La partie idéale est sublime dans cet artiste, à qui il ne manque qu'une couleur plus vraie et une perfection technique que le temps et l'expérience peuvent lui donner (Assézat X : 406-407).

Diderot once again employs the word “effroi”, with all its connotations of horror and fear, to describe the depth of feeling evoked in the painting's figures and in the people viewing it. The painting's “effroi” originates with Corésus, before seeming to fling itself out of him and to spread through the painting, like the black mist that signals the arrival of the two spirits, whose presence only intensifies the dread pervading the scene. The effect of this widespread horror is that an emotional response to *Corésus et Callirhoé* is as impossible to resist as the dangerous passions that cause and accompany mob psychology. Passion of all kinds being the province of ideal, it is to ideal that Diderot refers in this part of Grimm's final dialogue ; with the height of the emotions provoked by the painting corresponding to the greatness of the ideal.

Diderot's admiration for Fragonard's ideal does not, however, extend so far as to forgo any mention of negative criticism thereof. Diderot introduces his criticism of the painting's more passionate aspects with the statement that apart from his fear that “les beaux simulacres” of the dream he has had will disappear at the first sign of the Cross made in their vicinity, the only other impediments to the painting being considered truly sublime are the humourless members of the public who complain of what they call *Corésus et Callirhoé's* overly-theatrical nature. While these judgements do ring true to a certain extent – the painting's setting, as observed above, is intended to resemble a theatre and Diderot's presentation of the painting as a *tableau dramatique* exploits that intention – the philosopher's reaction to judgements of this kind is disdainful. Salon-goers who make them are described as being “d'un gout sévère” ; an appellation that implies all manner of hard-hearted sternness and Rousseau-like ill-humour. Diderot's mention of them in the same sentence as his fear that his dream will disappear at the first sign of the Cross only confirms Diderot's mockery of them, for it is impossible to take anything that directly follows such a humorous pronouncement seriously. Diderot does, however, have serious intentions in this mention of the Cross despite his joking tone ; intentions that are linked to the painting's powerful ideal. If Diderot fears that “les beaux simulacres” created by his dream will disappear as soon as “l'abominable

croix” (Assézat X : 184) intervenes, it is because he believes *Corésus et Callirhoé* to be the sort of magic that may, according to Catholic culture, be swept away by the power of the Cross along with the spells, incantations, and evil witches that are all the children of magic. This viewpoint is further strengthened by the popularity of the word “magie” in all manner of eighteenth-century criticism (Chouillet 1973 : 578), which suggests that the connection between art and magic would not have been an alien one to Diderot. It is therefore possible that Diderot’s remarks on the Cross’ unfortunate power to make his lovely “simulacres” disappear are only linked to ideal, for ideal is the magic of art. It is the aspect of art that moves the viewer most deeply for reasons that are the least easy to define. The ideal of a painting may incite the viewer to feelings and actions that they might never otherwise have contemplated : a spell – magic – has a similar effect. In equating the emotional effect of *Corésus et Callirhoé* to magic that may be destroyed by invoking the Cross, it would be easy to believe that Diderot has forgotten his earlier remarks on the wan hue of Callirhoé’s face and the androgyny of the painting’s male figures. It is after his statement on the similarities between magic and formidable ideal of *Corésus et Callirhoé*, however, that Diderot finally makes the connection between technique and ideal and constructs from them a “couple” (Lojkine 2009)<sup>93</sup>.

Diderot declares the beauty of his imagining of Fragonard’s painting, and of the painting itself, with Grimm’s statement that : “vous avez fait un beau rêve et Fragonard un beau tableau”. In this statement, the “beau rêve”, namely Diderot’s “traduction poétique” of the painting through the *mise en abyme* of *tableaux dramatiques* produced by the lantern in Plato’s cave, is presented as the substituting of bland journalism with something unashamedly literary and interesting to read. Alternatively, the “beau tableau” refers to the painting created by Fragonard and that Diderot claims to have missed seeing. It is to the “beau tableau” that Diderot/Grimm refers in this final verdict on *Corésus et Callirhoé* : “la partie idéale est sublime dans cet artiste<sup>94</sup>”. It is Fragonard’s ideal, not Diderot’s vision of it, that is finally called sublime.

This last paragraph in the critique of *Corésus et Callirhoé* presents the painting in a very positive way, both in terms of technique and of ideal, through Diderot’s powerful choice of words. Fragonard’s technique is referred to as a “machine pittoresque” ; the word “machine” conjuring up visions of the countless, rigorously functional machines that Diderot wrote

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<sup>93</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>94</sup> Our emphasis.

about in the *Encyclopédie* and that were, according to Eco, “celebrated for their rational efficiency” (2010 : 393). This “rational efficiency” in Diderot’s “machine pittoresque” is important, as it allies the notion of rationality firmly with the “machine” or the tools of the artist’s craft and automatically excludes each natural foe of rationality : emotion, imagination, ideal. Diderot refers to these with the words “magie” and “intelligence”. His mention of magic strengthens his message on the emotional power of ideal, discussed earlier in relation to the Cross, but, significantly and for the first time in the *Salons*, this power is now tempered by the word “intelligence”, and affixes a sentient perspective to the concept of ideal, a notion that, up to this moment, has been dominated exclusively by emotion. This introduction of rationality to both technique and ideal brings an aspect of *sang-froid* to painting that Diderot was to apply on a larger scale in the *Salon de 1767*. In his criticism of *Coréus et Callirhoé*, however, the link between the two concepts is made after Diderot’s affirmation that the painting succeeds in the domains of both technique and ideal. Diderot states that “la partie idéale est sublime dans cet artiste” and that Fragonard only lacks “une couleur plus vraie et une perfection technique que le temps et l’expérience peuvent lui donner”. Fragonard’s only defects as an artist lie in the domain of colour, and of “[la] perfection technique” in general. Fragonard already has a “sublime” command of ideal : all that is required of him to be a truly great artist is the technical perfection that Diderot believes he will acquire with time and experience. In creating this link between an artist’s greatness and his mastery of both technique and ideal in this most important part of the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot portrays the two concepts as being of equal importance. They do not war against each other, but complement each other ; working together as a “couple” (Lojkin 2009)<sup>95</sup> in a way that is mutually beneficial, in order to produce a work of art that is truly great.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has been an attempt to ascertain whether Diderot, at this chronological juncture of the *Salon de 1765*, regards technique and ideal as two separate concepts that are not necessarily interrelated or inter dependant, or as a “couple” (Lojkin 2009)<sup>96</sup> that cannot and do not exist separately, but that work together towards the production of great art.

In our analyses of Diderot’s commentary of Bachelier’s *La Charité Romaine* and Fragonard’s *Coréus et Callirhoé*, we have witnessed how imperfect technique may mar the beauty of superior ideal, and how mediocre ideal, that might otherwise have been passable, creates sub-

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<sup>95</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>96</sup> No page number provided in web document.

standard art when executed with poor technique. We have witnessed Diderot's concrete statements to this effect, as well as his application of these principles in his critique at various important points in the *Salon*. His conviction that technique and ideal are linked is no longer an indefinable instinct, or something that is contemplated on one page and forgotten the next. Technique and ideal have become for him, in this *Salon de 1765*, "les deux critères exclusifs du jugement de l'œuvre" (Lojkine 2009<sup>97</sup>) ; two criteria that are no longer opposed to each other but that work together in the creation of great art.

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<sup>97</sup> No page number provided in web document.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE SALON DE 1767

#### 5.1 Introduction

While the *Salon de 1765* is significant in that it gives Diderot the opportunity to truly finalise his theory that technique and ideal work together in a symbiotic relationship, the *Salon de 1767* is important by virtue of the place that it occupies in studies of Diderot's aesthetic. It is in this work that Diderot reaches the pinnacle of his conviction in the interdependence of technique and ideal, not by further developing it, but by putting it into practice in his critique on a truly monumental scale. Indeed, Diderot reviews each individual painting, sculpture and engraving in such exhaustive detail that a special edition of the *Correspondance Littéraire*, solely devoted to this *Salon*, had to be issued by Grimm (Chouillet 1984 in Angrémy *et al.* 1984 : 57). Our chapter will not be quite so lengthy, but will focus on Diderot's application of the "couple technique idéal" (Lojkine 2009)<sup>98</sup> to two particular paintings : Vien's *Saint Denis prêchant la foi en France*<sup>99</sup> and Doyen's *Le Miracle des Ardents*<sup>100</sup>.

These two paintings occupy a vital place in the history of the Salon as an institution, for various reasons :

[L'histoire de ces deux tableaux] c'est l'histoire d'un duel. Quand à l'automne de 1767 on entrait dans le Salon Carré du Louvre pour visiter l'exposition organisée par l'Académie royale de peinture, on était frappé, dès l'escalier, cet immense escalier qui occupait un quart de la salle unique d'exposition, par deux immenses tableaux, de taille et de format identique, tout en hauteur et cintrés, accrochés sur le mur de gauche. Diderot nous en prévient tout de suite : dans la cohue bruyante du Salon, où les commentaires vont bon train, ces deux tableaux sont la grande affaire qui a partagé le public (Lojkine 2010)<sup>101</sup>.

As if this provocative hanging of the *Saint Denis* and *Les Ardents* were not reason enough to invite comparison, the two paintings had also been commissioned to hang opposite each other in Paris' Église Saint-Roch and were the centre of a pre-existing, if entirely indirect, rivalry between Doyen, a lowly and virtually unknown *Académicien* and Vien, who was already a

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<sup>98</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>99</sup> Hereafter called the *Saint Denis*.

<sup>100</sup> Hereafter called *Les Ardents*.

<sup>101</sup> No page number provided in web document.

*Professeur* when Doyen was received into the *Académie* (Lojkin 2010)<sup>102</sup>. This rivalry, which took place against a backdrop of intrigue and infighting in the *Académie*, was based on status; on Doyen's desire for advancement and Vien's desire to improve his position in the upper echelons of the *Académie*. This difference in status is clearly reflected in the Salon's *livret*, in which Vien is placed at the prestigious position of number fifteen (just after Louis-Michel Van Loo, the *Académie*'s former-rector, and Hallé, recipient of royal patronage) and Doyen is placed at number sixty-seven (amongst the landscapes and genre paintings). The rivalry was also based on the differences in Vien and Doyen's aesthetic practices :

Doyen le coloriste, l'émule de Rubens et de ses tumultes colorés,  
(...) [et] son adversaire néo-classique, partisan des grecs et  
complice du comte de Caylus (...) Doyen est à l'école de Vien et  
cherche à rivaliser avec lui (Lojkin 2010)<sup>103</sup>.

While Diderot disapprovingly and ironically refers to this infighting during the course of the *Salon*, our interest in these paintings lies in the fact that Diderot himself had a profound fascination with them ; referring to them as “deux beaux tableaux, deux grandes machines” (Assézat XI : 30) and producing critiques of both of them that are significantly longer and more detailed than other reviews in the *Salon de 1767*. Both paintings are history paintings ; both were commissioned for the same church and were intended to be seen within the same internal space ; but what is most important for us is that Diderot compares these two paintings, reflects extensively on the strengths and weaknesses of each, and comes to the conclusion that there exists a mastery of technique and a deficiency of ideal in Vien, and a mastery of ideal and a deficiency of technique in Doyen.

The aim of this chapter is to establish whether Diderot, having concluded in 1765 that technique and ideal are a “couple” (Lojkin 2009)<sup>104</sup>, continues to advocate their interdependence in the *Salon de 1767* and uses this conviction as a methodology of art criticism to criticise art. We will attempt to establish this in three different steps. First, we will examine Diderot's comments on the effectiveness of Vien's combination of technique and ideal in his *Saint Denis* and whether these comments suggest a conviction that the two concepts work together in the creation of great art. Second, we will apply the same question to Doyen's *Les Ardents*. Third, we will examine the passages in which Diderot compares Vien and Doyen, in order to determine how Diderot's conviction that an interdependent

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<sup>102</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>103</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>104</sup> No page number provided in web document.

relationship exists between technique and ideal manifests itself as a methodology of art criticism.

## **5.2 Vien : *Saint-Denis prêchant la foi en France*<sup>105</sup>**

*Saint-Denis prêchant la foi en France* was the product of an ambitious renovation project initiated at the Église Saint-Roch by its abbot, the Abbé Marduel. This church served the melting pot of bohemia, new money, and (occasionally) old money that made up the *quartier* Saint-Roch, and many important figures of the Enlightenment, including Helvétius, Madame Geoffrin and Diderot himself, were interred at the church. The parish's free-thinking and secularist character, coupled with its inhabitants' tendency to prefer attending the nearby Louvre or *Théâtre français* to attending church, struck a rather embarrassing contrast to the deeply-religious parish of Saint-Sulpice, located across the river Seine<sup>106</sup>. The previous, Jansenist abbot's constant opposition to church authority had also been a blight on the Église Saint-Roch's reputation, and it was in the hope of improving his church's standing that the Abbé Marduel initiated an extensive renovation project; employing some of the greatest artists and sculptors of the age, including Pierre, Falconet and Challe (Lojkin : 2010)<sup>107</sup>. As to *Saint-Denis prêchant la foi en France* in particular, the painting came about as part of the project to address the matter of the church possessing almost no transept :

Cependant l'Église Saint-Roch toute en longueur pèche par la quasi absence de transept. Pour y remédier, le curé Marduel lance un projet d'aménagement en trompe l'œil au fond de chacune des courtes ailes du transept. Il adresse à cet effet un placet au Dauphin le 5 août 1763 : il s'agit de remplacer les portes latérales par deux autels dédiés respectivement à saint Denis, qui introduisit le christianisme en Gaule, et à sainte Geneviève, patronne de Paris (...). Le choix des saints est significatif : (...) La tragédie nationale est à la mode et donne lieu à de grandes scénographies publiques, où le peuple fraternise avec l'aristocratie dans le souvenir ému des pages glorieuses de l'histoire de France. La *Prédication de Saint Denis* comme la célébration des miracles de sainte Geneviève pour sauver Paris participent de cette veine et entendent en récupérer l'efficacité émotionnelle *ad majorem Dei gloriam* (Lojkin 2010)<sup>108</sup>.

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<sup>105</sup> See Appendix 5 (page 214) for full text of article.

<sup>106</sup> Diderot was obliged, in the last days of his life, to move from Saint-Sulpice to Saint-Roch, so that at the moment of his death, he would not be resident in a parish whose bishop might refuse, on the grounds of his atheism, to grant him burial. Such a fate had already befallen Voltaire, whose body had to be smuggled into a coach disguised as a sleeping passenger and taken out of Paris in order to be buried.

<sup>107</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>108</sup> No page number provided in web document.

The purpose, therefore, of the creation of the *Saint Denis*, was to commemorate the moment in which the apostle, Saint Denis, introduced Christianity to France ; Christianity being the religion that would play a dominant role in making France one of the most powerful nations in the world. This choice of theme would, in its turn, conform to the fashion for “la tragédie nationale” and would apparently encourage communication between the aristocracy and the masses ; destroying all barriers and all resentment between them in the name of celebrating France’s glory.

Why was it Vien, in particular, who had been chosen to paint this scene? According to Lojkine:

Pour le *Saint Denis*, il semble qu’il ait été d’abord confié à Doyen, puis assez vite à Deshays : en témoigne l’esquisse en camaïeux d’ocre conservée à Nîmes. Deshays appartenait à la même mouvance esthétique néo-baroque que Doyen, de sorte qu’il est clair aujourd’hui que le jeu, ou l’émulation entre les deux écoles de peinture n’était pas du tout voulu par les initiateurs du projet. C’est la mort prématurée du jeune Deshays en 1765 qui contraint l’équipe de l’abbé Marduel, pressée par le temps, à se tourner vers un peintre expérimenté, susceptible de réaliser rapidement le travail : le très officiel Vien est éloigné à tous points de vue d’un Falconet athée, d’un Doyen bouillonnant et d’un Boullée visionnaire, tous trois plus jeunes que lui (Lojkine 2010)<sup>109</sup>.

*Saint-Denis prêchant la foi en France* was not, therefore, a theme chosen by Vien himself, but a commission handed over to an experienced painter who could finish the job quickly. This is a fact that will prove important later in this chapter, when we come to analyse Diderot’s impressions of Vien’s command of ideal. For the moment, however, it is pertinent to begin our own analysis of Diderot’s criticism of this painting, now that we are sufficiently informed of the background to the *Saint Denis*’ inception.

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<sup>109</sup> No page number provided in web document.

At the end of his analysis of the *Saint Denis*, Diderot sums up his opinion of the painting in a typically concise manner :

Vien dessine bien ; peint bien ; mais il ne pense ni ne sent (...). On n'apprend jamais ce que le peintre de la prédication de Denis ignore. Pauvre d'idées il restera pauvre d'idées. Sans imagination il n'en aura jamais (Assézat XI : 35).

In this *Salon de 1767*, Diderot comes to the conclusion that “[Vien] ne pense ni ne sent” by scrutinising Vien’s technical skill, then his command of ideal, before finally stating what must be done to achieve the effective combination of the two. Our examination of Diderot’s critique of Vien will be conducted along the same lines.

### **5.2.1 Technique and ideal in the *Saint Denis***

With regard to Vien’s technique, Diderot has nothing but praise. This is demonstrated by his commentary on the portrayal of Saint Denis himself, “l’apôtre des gaules” :

Quant au faire, elle est bien peinte, bien empâtée ; la barbe large etouchée d’humeur. La draperie de la grande aube blanche qui tombe en plis parallèles et droits est très-belle (...) la figure entière ramasse sur elle toute la force, tout l’éclat de la lumière et appelle la première attention (Assézat XI : 30).

In these few lines, Diderot compliments both Vien’s ability to paint and to portray the drapery of Saint Denis’ robe, as well as his ability to work with the medium of paint in a way that is aesthetically pleasing. Diderot also comments on how Vien’s command of form and light contribute to a convincing portrayal of Saint Denis’ charisma as a speaker. These positive comments on Vien’s effective use of such diverse elements as medium, form and light in order to create beauty and an effective focal point for the painting, suggest a global approbation of Vien’s artistic technique that is reinforced by Diderot’s positive comments on the other figures in the painting. For example, the young man behind Saint Denis is praised for his beauty of form and colour, and is compared to Raphael in terms of the purity and divinity he exudes :

Le jeune homme qui est derrière le saint, sur le devant, est bien dessiné, bien peint, c’est une figure de Raphaël pour la pureté, qui est merveilleuse pour la noblesse et pour le caractère de tête qui est divin. Il est très fortement colorié (Assézat XI : 31-32).

It is when Diderot identifies and praises a well-executed serpentine line in the *Saint Denis* that his admiration for the totality of Vien's technique is confirmed. This artistic technique, referred to by Diderot as a line of liaison or "ligne de liaison", is a means of unifying a composition by drawing the viewer's eye across a certain trajectory ; a method that Diderot is familiar with thanks to his reading of Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty : Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste*<sup>110</sup>. Hogarth has the following to say on the subject of the serpentine line :

The serpentine line, by its waving and winding at the same time different ways, leads the eye in a pleasing manner along the continuity of its variety (...) and which by its twisting so many different ways, may be said to inclose (...) varied contents ; and therefore all its variety cannot be expressed on paper by one continued line, without the assistance of the imagination, or the help of a figure ; (...) that sort of proportioned, winding line, which will hereafter be called the precise serpentine line, or *line of grace*, is represented by a fine wire, properly twisted round the elegant and varied figure of a cone (Hogarth 1753 : 53).

The function of the serpentine line in "[leading] the eye in a pleasing manner along the continuity of its variety" is so inspiring to Diderot that he promises, in the *Préambule* to the *Salon de 1767*, to make reference to it in order to create a more vivid impression of a painting or sketch's layout for the reader :

Un simple croquis suffirait pour vous indiquer la disposition générale, les lumières, les ombres, la position des figures, leur action, les masses, les groupes ; cette ligne de liaison qui serpente et enchaîne les différentes parties de la composition ; vous liriez ma description et vous auriez ce croquis sous les yeux (Assézat XI : 4).

While this description only mentions the line of liaison's role in unifying a painting in terms of layout, Diderot goes into much more detail about the line of liaison's function later on in the *Salon*, in his article about Doyen :

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<sup>110</sup> Diderot makes direct reference to Hogarth twice in the course of the *Salons* (1765 and 1767) and, while mistakenly referring to the serpentine line as the *ligne de beauté* in the *Salon de 1767* (see below), goes on to make the mastery of this line an essential skill in the technique of every artist (Zitin 2013 : 555).

Il y a dans toute composition un chemin, une ligne qui passe par les sommités des masses ou des groupes, traversant différents plans, s'enfonçant ici dans la profondeur du tableau, là s'avançant sur le devant. Si cette ligne, que j'appellerai ligne de liaison, se plie, se replie, se tortille, se tourmente ; si ses convulsions sont petites, multipliées, rectilinéaires, anguleuses, la composition sera louche, obscure ; l'œil irrégulièrement promené, égaré dans un labyrinthe, saisira difficilement la liaison. Si au contraire elle ne serpente pas assez, si elle parcourt un long espace sans trouver aucun objet qui la rompe, la composition sera rare et décousue si elle s'arrête, la composition laissera un vide, un trou. Si l'on sent ce défaut et qu'on remplisse le vide ou trou d'un accessoire inutile, on remédiera à un défaut par un autre (Assézat XI : 174).

By telling us how an overly-complicated line of liaison will leave the eye “égaré dans un labyrinthe” and an overly-simple one will create “un vide, un trou” in the middle of the painting, Diderot makes it clear to us that the mastery of this technique is essential in ensuring both the unity and the technical excellence of a painting.

In his critique of Vien's use of the line of liaison, Diderot speaks of :

Ce chemin descendant mollement et serpentant largement depuis la Religion jusqu'au fond de la composition, à gauche où il se replie pour former circulairement, et à distance autour du saint, une espèce d'enceinte qui s'interrompt à la femme placée sur le devant, les bras dirigés vers le saint, et découvre toute l'étendue intérieure de la scène : ligne de liaison allant clairement, nettement, facilement, chercher les objets principaux de la composition, dont elle ne néglige que les fabriques de la droite et du fond, et les vieillards indiscrets interrompant le saint (Assézat XI : 31).

Diderot states that Vien has used the line of liaison to link up the principal objects of the composition, with the exception of the buildings to the left and right, and the elderly people interrupting the saint. The adverbs that Diderot uses to describe the movement of the line of liaison include “mollement” and “facilement”, both of which carry positive connotations of sinuosity, flow, a pleasant and easy trajectory for the eye to follow, and Diderot's critique of the *Saint Denis* carries no negative criticism of this particular technical device. Diderot therefore demonstrates that he approves of the way Vien has mastered the important artistic technique of the line of liaison.

From Diderot's positive reaction to Vien's command of such vital and diverse elements of technique as colour, form and line of liaison, it is tempting to conclude that Diderot considers Vien's technique to be flawless. However, while Diderot's comments on these particular elements of Vien's technique are certainly positive, the philosopher does have negative criticism to offer :

Du reste, remarquez pourtant malgré le prestige de cette harmonie de Vien, que [le tableau] est gris ; qu'il n'y a nulle variété dans ses carnations, et que les chairs de ses hommes et de ses femmes sont presque du même ton. Remarquez à travers la plus grande intelligence de l'art, que [le tableau] est sans idéal, sans verve, sans poésie, sans mouvement, sans incident, sans intérêt. Ceci n'est point une assemblée populaire, c'est une famille, une même famille. Ce n'est point une nation à laquelle on apporte une religion nouvelle, c'est une nation toute convertie. Quoi donc est-ce qu'il n'y avait dans cette contrée ni magistrats ni prêtres, ni citoyens instruits ? Que vois-je ? des femmes et des enfants. Et quoi encore ? des femmes et des enfants. C'est comme à Saint-Roch un jour de dimanche (Assézat XI : 33-34).

While Diderot is kind enough to soften his habitual *Schadenfreude* with two glowing compliments about “le prestige de cette harmonie de Vien” and “la plus grande intelligence de l'art”, he goes on describe the *Saint Denis* as being grey and monotonous in colour and lacking in *vraisemblance poétique* and *mécanique* with regard to its depiction of the flesh of men and women. This isolated instance of negative criticism of Vien's technique may seem small and insignificant compared to Diderot's otherwise positive opinion of it. This instance is important, however, because Diderot's detailed discussion of Vien's ideal directly follows it ; thus indicating a change in focus from technique to an ideal that Diderot considers to be lacking.

Not only does Diderot's direct mention of ideal (“sans idéal”) reveal a change in focus, he also makes clear reference to certain elements of painting that all relate to his vision of ideal : *verve*, *poésie*, *mouvement*, *incident*, *intérêt*. In terms of Diderot's actual *attitude* to Vien's ideal, one only has to examine his use of language to see that each word has been carefully chosen to emphasise the monotony of those elements of the painting that he is criticising, and to leave us in no doubt of his disapproval. For instance, in referring to the *Saint Denis* as being “sans idéal, sans verve, sans poésie, sans mouvement, sans incident, sans intérêt”, Diderot employs the preposition “sans” six times in a single sentence, emphasising, through



repetition, all that is lacking in the *Saint Denis*. Diderot also uses the imperative “remarquez” twice, to attract attention specifically to what he is criticising ; furthermore, the construction “ceci n’est point .../ce n’est point/ ... c’est”, further serves to emphasise and juxtapose what the painting should have been with what the painting is. Vien’s lack of ideal in creating a painting that, according to Diderot, more accurately represents a Christian family than an entire nation in the process of being swayed, through oratory, towards the worship of a new god, is further emphasised by Diderot’s use of amusing rhetorical questions : “Que vois-je? Des femmes et des enfants. Et quoi encore ? Des femmes et des enfants”. This dual use of the rhetorical question, followed by an anaphora which stresses the banality of the figures represented, all within the space of two lines, lends weight of Diderot’s questions, effectively obliging the reader to join him in questioning the wisdom of the choices Vien has made in terms of the content of the *Saint Denis*. These questions are also posed in a theatrical, dismissive and amused tone, which provokes the reader into sharing Diderot’s exasperation and his amusement. This combination of scathing style and tone reaches a climax in the cutting cruelty of Diderot’s last line : “C’est comme à Saint-Roch, un jour de dimanche”. This likens Saint Denis’ audience to an ordinary, and consequently dreary, church congregation on a Sunday. In ending with such a banal remark, Diderot creates a juxtaposition with the declamatory style of his previous comments and thus produces a metaphor for Vien’s failure to construct a worthy ideal. This extract therefore acts as a kind of preliminary criticism of Vien’s ideal, and, while small, is of such a punishing nature that we are left with no reason to expect that Diderot’s further and more detailed analysis of Vien’s ideal will be any less cutting.

Diderot’s outlook on Vien’s ideal is complex, due largely to Diderot’s tendency to avoid final, absolute statements as to the nature of his own opinion. For instance, Diderot initially presents Vien’s ideal as static, sterile and emotionless, even proposing a change in *choix de l’instant* (and thus in the entire subject matter of the painting) in the name of making the painting more poetical and imaginative. He then seems to undergo a shift in opinion by claiming that the artist’s excellent technique excuses his faulty ideal ; proposing that those who criticise Vien’s ideal do so without knowing what he calls “la raison”, that is, the true, technical reason for Vien’s blandness :

On accuse avec moi toute la composition de Vien d'être froide ; et elle l'est : mais ceux qui font ce reproche à l'artiste en ignorent certainement *la raison*<sup>111</sup> (...) Je prétends qu'il faut d'autant moins de mouvement dans une composition plus forte, ou prise plus au-delà de la nature commune. Cette loi s'observe à la morale et au physique : au physique c'est la loi des masses, à la morale c'est la loi des caractères. Plus les masses sont considérables, plus ils ont d'inertie (Assézat XI : 36).

We will deal with this apparent contradiction by analysing Diderot's criticism of Vien's ideal, and attempting to find any suggestion relating to the possible interdependence of technique and ideal.

Following Diderot's comparison of Vien's portrayal of the crowd in the *Saint Denis* to "Saint-Roch, un jour de dimanche", his criticism develops into a series of lengthy suggestions for the improvement of ideal in the *Saint Denis*. This advice to Vien occurs in two stages : the first concerning his portrayal of certain figures ; the second concerning the quantity of movement in the painting.

In the first, shorter stage of advice, Diderot proposes improvements to the poses and facial expressions of certain figures :

De graves magistrats, s'ils y avaient été, auraient écouté et pesé ce que la doctrine nouvelle avait de conforme ou de contraire à la tranquillité publique. Je les vois debout, attentifs, les sourcils baissés ; leur tête et leur menton appuyés sur leurs mains. Des prêtres dont les dieux auraient été menacés, s'il y en avait eu, je les aurais vus furieux et se mordant les lèvres de rage. Des citoyens instruits tels que vous et moi, s'il y en avait eu, auraient hoché la tête de dédain et se seraient dit d'un bout de la scène à l'autre : "*Autres platitudes qui ne valent pas mieux que les nôtres*" (Assézat XI : 34).

Diderot's use of language in this extract is significant, particularly his extensive application of the past conditional : "des graves magistrats (...) auraient écouté" ; "les prêtres dont les dieux auraient été menacés", etc. His intention in using the conditional mode in the past is twofold. First, to highlight, through language, what the *Saint Denis* might have looked like had its creator had a better understanding of ideal. Second, to instil a sense of regret in Vien that he has not made better artistic choices. Diderot seeks to achieve this second goal by imagining new poses and facial expressions for several important groups of figures in the crowd.

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<sup>111</sup> Our emphasis.

Magistrates, for example, are both attentive and pensive, weighing up the new religion's implications for public stability. Priests of the old order, who feel their power threatened in the face of Christianity, are furious, biting their lips in anger. Educated citizens (which Diderot craftily describes as "tels que vous et moi", thus flattering both the reader and himself) look on disdainfully, sceptical that a new religion will be any better than the old one. What is significant in these suggested changes is that the individual motivations and concerns of each figure are imagined beforehand, and play a vital role in the way they are portrayed, with a good portrayal of a figure's attitude constituting a good command of ideal in Diderot's eyes. Diderot's commentary here only calls for a revision of certain figures in the crowd however, and it is in the second stage of advice to Vien that Diderot suggests the most radical changes to the *Saint Denis*.

In the second and most significant set of advice in his criticism of Vien, Diderot insists that movement on the most monumental scale and incidents of the most violent and diverse nature can be incorporated into the scene, even if at first glance, the inclusion of movement, upheaval and violence in a scene set during a sermon might seem strange :

Mais croyez-vous qu'avec du génie il n'eût pas été possible d'introduire dans cette scène le plus grand mouvement, les incidens les plus violents et les plus variés ? - *Dans une prédication* ? - Dans une prédication. - *Sans choquer la vraisemblance* ? - Sans la choquer. Changez, seulement l'instant ; et prenez le discours de Denis à sa péroration lorsqu'il a embrasé toute la populace de son fanatisme ; lorsqu'il lui a inspiré le plus grand mépris pour ses dieux. Alors vous verrez le saint ardent, enflammé, transporté de zèle, encourageant ses auditeurs à briser leurs dieux et à renverser leurs autels. Vous verrez ceux-ci suivre le torrent de son Éloquence et de leur persuasion mettre la corde au cou à leurs divinités et les tirer de dessus leurs piédestaux. Vous en verrez les débris. Au milieu de ces débris vous verrez les magistrats s'interposant inutilement, leurs personnes insultées et leur autorité méprisée. Vous verrez toutes les fureurs de la superstition nouvelle se mêler à celles de la superstition ancienne. Vous verrez des femmes retenir leurs maris, qui s'élanceront sur l'apôtre pour l'égorger. Vous verrez, des archers conduire en prison quelques néophytes tout fiers de souffrir. Vous verrez, d'autres femmes embrasser les pieds du saint, l'entourer et lui faire un rempart de leurs corps, car dans ces circonstances les femmes ont bien une autre violence que les hommes. Saint Jérôme disait, aux sectaires de son temps : Adressez-vous aux femmes si vous voulez que votre doctrine prospère" (Assézat XI : 34-35).

For Diderot, this single alteration of *l'instant* changes the entire painting, and gives it the emotional impact that he believes it lacks. In changing *l'instant*, the painting is transformed from a state of serenity into something violent and chaotic. This change of moment is reflected in Diderot's use of extremely vivid, emotive language. This language makes the scene come alive on the page, "vous verrez le saint *ardent, enflammé, transporté de zèle, encourageant* ses auditeurs à *briser* leurs dieux"<sup>112</sup>, and creates a portrayal of the consequences of religious fanaticism and the bloody zeal of the converted, with Diderot's own disdain for religious fanaticism contributing to the realism of the painting he imagines. Images of old gods are torn down, magistrates try to intervene, women hold back their husbands and kiss the feet of the Saint, over-zealous converts are taken to prison, ready to face whatever horrors may lie there in the name of their new god, etc. In each of these imagined scenes, the thoughts and feelings of each individual figure have been considered beforehand, and play a vital role in the depiction of the actions they are performing.

From a grammatical point of view, Diderot's use of the future indicative tense, which carries no implications of doubt or possibility, only inevitability, serves to emphasise Diderot's confidence in his own advice. The repetition of "vous verrez" is particularly noteworthy ; first, because it describes what the painting *will* become if Diderot's advice is heeded, even if this transformation only takes place in the reader's imagination ; second, because the repetition also serves to build the emotional impact of the language *and* of the new scene up to a climax. In demonstrating to us how glorious the *Saint Denis* could have been from an emotional perspective had Vien only had a better understanding of ideal, Diderot obliges the reader to confront, as if for the first time, the unpleasant reality that the real *Saint Denis* looks nothing like the painting that has just been created with words. This, in turn, leads Diderot to deliver what appears to be his final verdict on Vien's ideal :

Voilà la scène que j'aurais décrite si j'avais été poète ; et celle que j'aurais peinte, si j'avais été artiste. Vien dessine bien ; peint bien; mais il ne pense ni ne sent : Doyen serait son écolier dans l'art ; mais il serait son maître en poésie (...) on n'apprend jamais ce que le peintre de la prédication de Denis ignore. Pauvre d'idées il restera pauvre d'idées. Sans imagination il n'en aura jamais. Sans chaleur d'âme toute sa vie il sera froid (Assézat XI : 35).

This passage is damning, and risks overturning all of Diderot's previous praise for Vien. To begin with, Diderot refers to his own re-imagining of the *Saint Denis*, calling it the scene he

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<sup>112</sup> Our emphasis

would have described had he been a poet, and the scene that he would have painted had he been an artist : in other words, Vien cannot be considered a poet nor an artist. Diderot also declares that Vien “ne pense ni ne sent” ; effectively accusing the artist of being incapable of thought or feeling<sup>113</sup> before comparing him unfavourably to his rival : “Doyen serait son écolier dans l’art, mais il serait son maître en poésie”. This comment is both stinging and deliberately insulting, when considered in the light of the “duel” between Vien and Doyen mentioned earlier in this chapter. Though comparisons between the two artists are inevitable in the context of the *Salon de 1767*, particularly when their paintings were displayed in a manner intended to invite comparison, Vien, a *Professeur* at the Académie, would almost certainly have been insulted by the idea of his possessing an ideal of such low standards that an unknown and newly-received *Académicien* like Doyen could ever be his “maître” in terms of ideal. Diderot’s continuation of his attack on Vien’s ideal is punctuated by his use of the word “bien” to describe Vien’s *technical* proficiency. This sudden reference to technique is not clumsy, but deliberate ; the adjective “bien” resonating by virtue of its remarkable lack of enthusiasm, and contrasting sharply with Diderot’s earlier glowing comments on Vien’s technique. The implication is that a mediocre command of ideal makes a superior command of technique irrelevant. Diderot then declares Vien to be incapable of either thought or feeling, powerless to improve himself in respect of either, and possessed of a blandness and coldness of spirit and imagination that is utterly irreparable. This is not only an attack on Vien’s artistry, it is also an attack on his humanity that denies him the ability to think, feel or even imagine.

Diderot’s overall attitude to Vien’s ideal is overwhelmingly negative. Not only does Diderot have no positive comments to offer, he also makes scathing attacks on Vien’s realism, technique and personality, and accuses him of being soulless and cold. Had Vien’s command of ideal been of the same level of his command of technique, the *Saint Denis* would have been a much better painting. Technique and ideal would consequently have worked together in the creation of this new, superior painting, and we might easily have concluded that in the creation of great art, the relationship between technique and ideal is indeed interdependent. Diderot, however, proceeds to destroy this argument by turning once again to the question of Vien’s excellent technique and using it to justify his less-than-perfect command of ideal :

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<sup>113</sup> It should be noted that these words mirror Diderot’s commentary on Bachelier’s *Jason et Médée* in the *Salon de 1759* : “ce peintre ne pense ni ne sent” (Assézat X : 93). This mirroring of words does not only emphasise Diderot’s evolution as an art critic since the *Salon de 1759*. It also serves to strengthen our argument, conducted in Chapter 3, that Diderot’s understanding of the “couple technique-idéal” (Lojkine 2009)<sup>113</sup> in the early *Salons* was present in him, but unacknowledged.

On accuse avec moi toute la composition de Vien d'être froide ; et elle l'est : mais ceux qui font ce reproche à l'artiste en ignorent certainement la raison. Je leur déclare que, sans rien changer à ce tableau, mais rien du tout qu'une seule et unique chose, qui n'est ni l'ordonnance, ni des incidents, ni de la position, ni du caractère de figure ; ni de la couleur, ni des ombres et de la lumière, bientôt je les mettrais dans le cas d'y demander encore, s'il se-peut, plus de repos et de tranquillité. J'en appelle de ce qui suit à ceux qui sont profonds dans la pratique et dans la partie spéculative de l'art. Je prétends qu'il faut d'autant moins de mouvement dans une composition plus forte, ou prise plus au-delà de la nature commune. Cette loi s'observe à la morale et au physique : au physique c'est la loi des masses, à la morale c'est la loi des caractères. Plus les masses sont considérables, plus elles ont d'inertie. (Assézat XI : 36).

Diderot sets himself up in a position of superiority to other people attending the *Salon* and claims that while they may join him in calling Vien's composition cold, they are unlike him in that they "en ignorent certainement la raison [pour cette froideur]". He contradicts all of his previous assertions and suggestions for the improvement of Vien's painting by paradoxically declaring that he asks for *no changes at all* and claims that his explanation of Vien's coldness will make those who criticise this aloofness call for more rather than less of it. When he goes on to explain the mysterious "raison" behind the coldness of Vien's painting, attempting, through this explanation, to justify his contradiction of himself, he claims, first, that "la raison" is only discernible to "ceux qui sont profonds dans la pratique et dans la partie spéculative de l'art", and second, that the coldness in Vien's painting is consistent with the laws of science.

According to Diderot, the accurate portrayal of large masses of people hinges on their being painted without movement. An artist's depiction of facial expressions and passions is necessarily governed by the same rule :

Dans les scènes les plus effrayantes, si les spectateurs sont des personnages vénérables, si je vois sur leurs fronts ridés et sur leurs têtes chauves les traces de l'âge et de l'expérience ; si les femmes sont composées, grandes de forme et de caractère de visage ; si ce sont des natures patagones, je serais fort étonné d'y voir beaucoup de mouvement. Les expressions quelles qu'elles soient, les passions et le mouvement diminuent à proportion que les natures sont plus exagérées et voilà pourquoi nos demi-connoisseurs accusent Raphaël d'être froid, lorsqu'il est vraiment sublime ; lorsqu'en homme de génie il proportionne les expressions les mouvements, les passions, les actions à la nature qu'il a imaginée et choisie (Assézat XI : 36-37).

The movement depicted in a painting must be correctly proportioned to the “les expressions (...), les passions, les actions [que l’artiste] a imaginées et choisies”. The balance of a large composition can only be achieved through movement that is restrained. The coldness in Vien’s painting is therefore not an error in ideal, but a matter of safeguarding the work’s equilibrium.

This conclusion is rather difficult to believe after Diderot has so extensively set about proving that Vien’s lack of passion is a negative rather than a positive trait, and the philosopher quickly attempts to eliminate all questioning or annoyance on the part of the reader by referencing Raphael ; whom he claims was of similar opinion to himself. According to Diderot, Raphael, “[l’homme] de génie”, always maintained correct proportions between the expressions, movements, passions and actions of his paintings, according to how they appear in nature. Diderot also makes use of this reference to Raphael to blast “les demi-connoisseurs [qui] accusent Raphaël d’être froid, lorsqu’il est vraiment sublime”. The term “demi-connoisseurs” no doubt applies to everybody who does not share Diderot’s views, and is therefore incapable of seeing that coldness of emotion is necessary to maintain proportion in large works of art with a great deal of movement.

While all this talk of the laws of nature and “demi-connoisseurs” is no doubt motivated by a desire to distract us from the fact that Diderot is contradicting all of his previous assertions in his analysis of Vien’s ideal, the reference to Raphael does prove useful in that Diderot extends it into a new set of advice to artists on the subject of equilibrium in composition :

Je prescrirais donc le principe suivant à l’artiste : Si vous prenez des natures énormes, que votre scène soit presque immobile. Si vous prenez des natures petites que votre scène soit tumultueuse et troublée. Mais il y a un milieu entre le froid et l’extravagant ; et ce milieu c’est le point où, relativement à l’action représentée, le choix de nature se combine pour le plus grand avantage possible avec la quantité du mouvement. Quelque soit la nature qu’on préfère, le mouvement suit la raison inverse de l’âge, depuis la vieillesse jusqu’à l’enfance. Quelque soit le module ou la proportion des figures, le mouvement suit la même raison inverse. Voilà les éléments de la composition. C’est l’ignorance de ces éléments qui a donné lieu à la diversité des jugements qu’on porte de Raphaël (Assézat XI : 37).

The “nature” in a painting must always be relative to the quantity of movement represented : larger scenes must have very little movement in order to maintain equilibrium ; smaller

scenes must have a great deal of movement in order to do the same. This is the reason behind the coldness of Vien's *Saint Denis*, and the reason that Diderot has decided to overturn his entire argument on Vien's poor ideal in the name of "science". It is necessary, however, to consider what effect this particular foray into the paradoxical has on an attempt to establish the existence of an interdependent relationship between technique and ideal, and whether everything that Diderot has said before turning to "science" as an explanation for Vien's coldness should be disregarded.

Diderot himself provides an answer to this question :

Si mes pensées sont justes, vous les fortifierez de raisons qui ne me viennent pas ; et de conjecturales qu'elles sont, vous les rendrez évidentes et démontrées. Si elles sont fausses vous les détruirez. Vraies ou fausses, le lecteur y gagnera toujours quelque chose (Assézat XI : 42).

This invitation to the reader to accept or reject Diderot's ideas according to the available evidence puts the reader in the position of being able to select the argument that best suits his purposes. In the context of confirming Diderot's conviction that an interdependent relationship must exist between technique and ideal in the production of great art, Diderot's first argument that while Vien's technique is sublime, he lacks sufficient imagination to make his ideal similarly awe-inspiring, is the most appropriate one to adopt here. This means that it is possible to cleave to the conclusion, made after the discussion of Vien's ideal, that Diderot's comments on Vien do indeed advocate the need in great art of an interdependent relationship between technique and ideal. A greater imagination and a more profound sense of feeling, coupled with Vien's superior technique, would have rendered the *Saint Denis* a far superior painting.



### 5.3 Doyen : *Le Miracle des Ardents*<sup>114</sup>

As described above, the works of both Vien and Doyen came about during the redecoration of the Église Saint-Roch. The church's north chapel was to be devoted to Saint Denis ; the south chapel to Saint Geneviève. Doyen, a young and inexperienced painter at the time, was hesitant on the subject of which decoration he should undertake, and even produced a sketch on the theme of *Saint Denis prêchant la foi en France* that would eventually be undertaken by Vien. Doyen then resolved to decorate the south chapel with a composition depicting Saint Geneviève's protection of Paris from the invasion of the Huns. After creating three preparatory drawings on this episode, Doyen changed his subject matter once again, to Saint Geneviève's salvation of Paris from an epidemic called *le mal des ardents*. This epidemic, which struck the city in the year 1129, took the form of fire from heaven. In its victims, it brought about violent convulsions and internal pain which would lead to delirium, and eventually death. Doyen's preparation for the painting was extensive, and included a trip to Flanders to study the masterpieces of the Flemish school. Doyen made his first sketch of *Les Ardents* in Flanders, and the influence of the Flemish school is present in the painting's dark palette and the morbidity of its vivid portrayal of human suffering. The Flemish influence is much insisted upon by Diderot in his criticism of *Le Mal des Ardents*, as the philosopher makes repeated comparisons between Doyen and the Flemish Baroque painter Rubens. This association was also made by many other critics in Diderot's time, who identified similarities in the strong sense of movement and piercing emotion that may be found in the works of both painters (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 190).

Doyen's *Les Ardents* was one of the most popular paintings at the *Salon*. Though placed alongside Vien's as one entered, the reasons for its popularity were quite different from those that motivated the Salon-going public's liking for the *Saint Denis*. *Les Ardents* was both admired and censured for its emotional power, indeed the emotions it inspired were said to be so penetrating that many Salon-goers were both moved and horrified by it (Volle 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 189). Diderot's own opinion of *Les Ardents* is complex. He refers to the painting as being "beau et très beau ; il est chaud ; il est plein d'imagination et de verve" (Assézat XI : 177). The painting is thus not only very beautiful, but "chaud" ; provoking heat rather than warmth in the emotions of the viewer. In this description of the painting's sense of life and of the emotions it evokes in the viewer, Diderot portrays *Les Ardents* as a painting

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<sup>114</sup> See Appendix 5 (page 222) for full text of article.

that is by no means lacking in ideal. Diderot does not, however, make any pretensions to the complete perfection of *Les Ardents* in the domain of ideal :

Au premier aspect, cette machine est grande, imposante, appelle, arrête ; elle pourrait inspirer la terreur ensemble et la pitié. Elle n'inspire que la terreur ; et c'est la faute de l'artiste, qui n'a pas su rendre les incidents pathétiques qu'il avait imaginés (Assézat XI : 167).

While not discounting the shock and awe effect of *Les Ardents*, Diderot chooses to illustrate what the painting might have been directly after describing what it is, thus revealing a lack of satisfaction with the final result. This dissatisfaction is compounded by the use of the verb “pouvoir” in the conditional to describe the classical ideal of pity and fear as the highest and purest of human emotions ; emotions that the artist has failed to convey. Diderot blames Doyen for this failure, and declares that the artist's inability to properly portray the pathetic events that he has imagined has only succeeded in inspiring terror in the viewer : Doyen has painted one half of an ideal. Diderot's conviction that Doyen lacks the knowledge to accurately portray what he imagines is not linked to what Doyen has painted, but to how he has painted it. Therefore, Doyen's imagination and emotional maturity may be considerable, but his command of technique is not sufficient to portray the emotion of the world that he wants to depict. Later in his analysis, Diderot makes this fact clearer :

Il y a un écueil à craindre pour Doyen ; c'est qu'échauffé par son morceau du Miracle des ardents, dont la poésie a plutôt fait le succès que le technique (car, à trancher le mot, en peinture, ce n'est qu'une très-magnifique ébauche), il ne passe la vraie mesure ; que sa tête ne s'exalte trop, et qu'il ne se jette dans l'outré. Il est sur la ligne ; un pas de travers de plus, et le voilà dans le fracas, dans le désordre (Assézat XI : 178).

In this extract, Diderot clearly states that the success of *Les Ardents* may be attributed to its intense poetical nature rather than to its technique. Indeed, Diderot goes so far as to state that the painting is only “une très magnifique ébauche” : a beautiful draft, rather than a beautiful painting. Diderot also expresses a fear that if Doyen allows his imagination to run away with him, the artist will develop a taste for the bizarre, and will spend the rest of his life creating chaotic and disorderly works. It is clear from this extract that Diderot considers Doyen's technique to be detrimental to his ideal, and it is this conviction that dominates Diderot's criticism of *Les Ardents*. In this section on Doyen, we will observe Diderot's elaboration of

this characterisation of *Les Ardents* in order to determine whether the concepts of technique and ideal are treated as interdependent by Diderot.

### 5.3.1 Technique and ideal in *Les Ardents*

*Les Ardents* is set at the door of a hospital in Paris, where the sick and the dying, who have come to seek help, are locked together in a great writhing mass of horror and misery. Saint Geneviève, accompanied by angels and cupids, can be seen on high, about to intercede. This choice of setting is Diderot's first negative criticism of *Les Ardents* :

On a de la peine à se faire une idée nette de cet hôpital, de cette fabrique, de ce massif. On ne sait à quoi tient cette louche du local, si ce n'est peut-être au défaut de la perspective, à la bizarrerie occasionnée par la difficulté d'agencer sur une même scène des événements disparates. Dans les catastrophes publiques, on voit des gueux aux environs des palais ; mais on ne voit jamais les habitants des palais autour de la demeure des gueux (Assézat XI : 167).

Diderot identifies a number of technical problems in Doyen's use of the hospital as a setting. The first is the ineffectiveness of the setting's *vraisemblance mécanique*, as the hospital, according to Diderot, is not distinguishable as such and more closely resembles a conglomeration of rubble ; thus impeding the viewer's ability to identify the setting quickly. Diderot then goes on to describe the setting as "louche", a word that possesses distinct connotations of shiftiness. Diderot identifies two principal reasons that account for this undesirable impression of the painting, namely its perspective and the placing of several disparate events in the same locale which has led to a reversal of traditional social roles. Diderot elaborates on each of these issues, and offers advice as to how they could have been avoided.

De cent personnes, même intelligentes, il n'y en a pas quatre qui aient saisi le local. On aurait évité ce défaut, ou par les avis d'un bon architecte, ou par une composition mieux digérée, plus ensemble, plus une. Cette porte n'a point l'air d'une porte ; c'est, en dépit de l'inscription, une fenêtre par laquelle on imagine au premier coup d'œil que ce malade s'élance (Assézat XI : 167).

Diderot begins his discussion of perspective with the hyperbolic statement that only four out of one hundred relatively intelligent people would be capable of guessing at the painting's locale. For instance, the hospital door resembles a window despite Doyen's attempt to correct this by placing an inscription above it. This is an error of perspective and of *vraisemblance*

*mécanique* that Diderot claims could have been corrected with the help of a good architect and with a greater concentration, on Doyen's part, on issues of unity and harmony in the painting.

Diderot introduces the issue of the placement of disparate events in a single setting through a discussion of the female figure at the hospital door :

Et puis, encore une fois, pourquoi la scène se passe-t-elle à la porte d'un hôpital ? Est-ce la place d'une femme importante ? car elle paraît telle à son caractère, au luxe de son vêtement, à son cortège, aux marques d'honneurs de son mari. Je vous devine, monsieur Doyen ; vous avez imaginé des scènes de terreur isolées, ensuite un local qui pût les réunir. Il vous fallait un massif à pic pour le cadavre que vous vouliez me montrer la tête, les bras et les cheveux pendants. Il vous fallait un égout pour en faire sortir les deux jambes de votre autre cadavre. Je trouve fort bons, et l'hôpital, et le massif, et l'égout ; mais quand vous m'exposerez ensuite à la porte de cet hôpital, sur ce parvis, dans le voisinage de cet égout, au milieu de la plus vile populace, parmi les gueux, le gouverneur de la ville richement vêtu, chamarré de cordons, sa femme en beau satin blanc ; je ne pourrai m'empêcher de vous dire : Monsieur Doyen, et les convenances, les convenances ? (Assézat XI : 167).

The female figure's bearing, her fine clothes, her entourage and the apparent high status of her husband indicate that she is of considerable social importance. Through the use of the rhetorical question "Est-ce la place d'une femme importante?", Diderot emphasises how out of place this richly-apparrelled figure seems in a setting typically frequented by the lower echelons of society. Diderot suggests that this discrepancy stems from Doyen having first imagined isolated scenes before attempting to reunite them in a single setting capable of accommodating them all. For instance, the corpse lying on the hospital steps would necessitate a mounted structure of some kind, while a sewer or drain would be required in order to fully exploit the poetic effect of the two disembodied limbs protruding from it. Diderot favours the hospital, the steps and the sewer as separate settings, but insists that in choosing to unite them, Doyen has failed to consider the impropriety of placing certain figures in these settings. The setting of *Les Ardents* is repulsive ; a fact that Diderot conveys to us through the use of an accumulation of prepositions of space and the repetition of the demonstrative adjective : "quand vous m'exposerez ensuite à la porte de cet hôpital, sur ce parvis, dans le voisinage de cet égout, au milieu de la plus vile populace, parmi les gueux". Diderot then contrasts the filth of the setting and of its populace with the figures frequenting

it, namely the richly-clad city governor and his wife in white satin. This is a powerful and vivid juxtaposition. The vileness of the setting and the dejected condition of its beggars is intensified tenfold by the white of the satin dress. Perhaps the placement of figures of such disparate social standing was Doyen's way of commenting on the universality of human misery. Diderot, however, sees this as an assault on propriety, and seeks to remind Doyen that in the midst of the greatest public catastrophes, propriety must be observed. As Diderot remarked earlier in his analysis, "Dans les catastrophes publiques, on voit des gueux aux environs des palais ; mais on ne voit jamais les habitants des palais autour de la demeure des gueux". Doyen's placing of disparate scenes in one place, and his consequent assault on what is proper, reveal a lack of control of *vraisemblance poétique*, for he has not imagined an effective way to translate what he has seen in nature onto the canvas. If he had, the peculiarity of placing noble ladies among beggars would not have escaped him. These discrepancies of technique compromise the viewer's ability to suspend disbelief and therefore to interact with the painting in an emotional and imaginative way. This, in its turn, suggests a symbiotic relationship between technique and ideal, for had Doyen's technique been better, his painting might also have been a better work of art.

After discussing the figures of the rich woman and her husband, Diderot addresses Doyen's portrayal of the saint.

Votre sainte Geneviève est bien posée, bien dessinée, bien coloriée, bien drapée, bien en l'air ; elle ne fatigue point ces nuages qui la soutiennent ; mais je la trouve, moi et beaucoup d'autres, un peu maniérée. À son attitude contournée, à ses bras jetés d'un côté et sa tête de l'autre, elle a l'air de regarder Dieu en arrière, et de lui dire par-dessus son épaule : "Allons donc, faites finir cela, puisque vous le pouvez. C'est un assez plat passe-temps que vous vous donnez là". Il est certain qu'il n'y a pas le moindre vestige d'intérêt, de commisération sur son visage, et qu'on en fera, quand on voudra, une jolie Assomption, à la manière de Boucher (Assézat XI : 168).

Though Diderot approves of Saint Geneviève's pose, colour, drapery, and apparent lightness of form, the light-hearted tone of his humorous observations regarding her lightness of being. It is the saint's expression, which Diderot describes as snobbish, that is to blame for Diderot's impression of her being predominantly negative. Diderot believes that the inherent snobbishness associated with the term "maniérée" is inappropriate in a portrayal of a benevolent saint coming to the assistance of her people, and accentuates this through the use

of irony. Speaking to God over her shoulder, a posture that is exceedingly familiar and somewhat disrespectful when dealing with the Creator of the universe, Saint Geneviève seems to make the observation : “Allons donc, faites finir cela, puisque vous le pouvez. C’est un assez plat passe-temps que vous vous donnez là ”. Diderot’s use of the expression “allons donc” gives an informal, conversational tone to her words that emphasises her disrespect for God and her apparent heartlessness. Her words, which equate the gruesome human suffering brought on by le *mal des ardents* to a particularly boring hobby, have a similar effect. The saint’s expression, is not, therefore, particularly saintly : she is lacking in benevolence and kindness, and does not seem pressed to end the suffering around her. Diderot rounds off his analysis of the figure of the saint by suggesting that Doyen use the saint’s face as a model for an Assumption<sup>115</sup> painted after the manner of Boucher. The comparison with Boucher, and therefore with everything that Diderot considers to be frivolous and immoral (Volle 1984 in Angrémy *et al.* 1984 : 189), seals this figure’s fate : she may very well be a saint, but she has failed to seem very much like one. From a technical perspective, she is well painted, but she is painted as though she had no compassion. Doyen has cleaved to the principles of *vraisemblance mécanique*, but has copied nature instead of translating it. If Doyen had possessed the technical proficiency to properly employ *vraisemblance poétique* in his portrayal of the saint, she might have improved the audience’s ability to respond to the painting with compassion.

Diderot’s concern with the proper use of *la vraisemblance* extends into his discussion of the cherubim placed behind Saint Geneviève.

Cette guirlande de têtes de chérubins qu’elle a derrière elle et sous ses pieds, forme un papillotage de ronds lumineux qui me blessent; et puis ces anges sont des espèces de cupidons soufflés et transparents. Tant qu’il sera de convention que ces natures idéales sont de chair et d’os, il faudra les faire de chair et d’os. C’était la même faute dans votre ancien tableau de Diomède et Venus. La déesse ressemblait à une grande vessie, sur laquelle on n’aurait pu s’appliquer avec un peu d’action, sans l’exposer à crever avec explosion. Corrigez-vous de ce faire-là ; et songez que, quoique l’ambrosie dont les dieux du paganisme s’enivraient fût une boisson très-légère, et que la vision béatifique dont nos bienheureux se repaissent soit une viande fort creuse, il n’en vient pas moins des êtres dodus, charnus, gras, solides et potelés, et que les fesses de Ganymède et les tétons de la Vierge

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<sup>115</sup> Catholic term referring to the Virgin Mary’s ascent into heaven, which is celebrated by Catholics as a feast (de Calan *et al* 2009 : 126).

Marie doivent être aussi bons à prendre qu'à aucun giton, qu'à aucune catin de ce monde pervers (Assézat XI : 168).

Diderot makes use of the verb “se blesser” to describe the cherubim’s overall effect on him as a viewer ; a melodramatic description of the intensity of negative feeling they provoke in him. He intensifies this sense of negativity by referring to the cherubim as “des *espèces*<sup>116</sup> de cupidons” ; a significant remark, as the word “espèces” clearly indicates Diderot’s uncertainty as to their precise identity. Diderot accounts for this uncertainty by stating that the cupids do not appear to follow the conventions of “nature idéale” ; this because they do not appear to be made of flesh and blood. Diderot emphasises this error of *vraisemblance mécanique* with a discussion of a previous painting by Doyen’s, *Vénus et Diomède*. Diderot expresses his opinion of *Vénus et Diomède* in outlandish terms ; comparing Doyen’s Venus to a large bladder that would only require marginal pressure on it to make it explode. He also makes flippant comments to the effect that the ambrosia consumed by the gods was not so heavy a drink as to produce dreams of a surreal reality; on the contrary, the individuals perceived by the gods during their visions were no less plump, voluptuous and solid as they might have been in reality. This facetiousness may be interpreted as a commentary on the importance of *vraisemblance mécanique* no matter what the subject matter of the painting may be : Venus cannot be recognised as Venus if she resembles a bladder, the Virgin Mary cannot be identified as such unless she is recognisable as human, and the cherubim portrayed by Doyen in *Le Miracle des Ardents* cannot be recognised as such unless they appear to be from flesh and blood and resemble what they ought to be. By Diderot’s definition, a viewer cannot respond passionately to a painting if it is not representational enough to be recognisable. In *Le Miracle des Ardents*, the viewer is prevented from responding to the cherubim because they are not immediately identifiable as such. This problem is not confined to Doyen’s cherubim, however. In the very next paragraph, Diderot describes the entire upper part of Doyen’s painting as demonstrating such a poor command of *vraisemblance mécanique* that his work is weakened (“affaiblie”) and dulled (“éteinte”) :

Du reste, le nuage épais qui s’étend sur le haut de vos bâtiments est très-vaporeux ; et toute cette partie supérieure de votre composition est affaiblie, éteinte, avec beaucoup d’intelligence. Je ne saurais en conscience vous en dire autant des nuages qui portent votre sainte. Les enfants enveloppés de ces nuages sont légers et minces comme des bulles de savon, et les nuages lourds comme des ballons serrés de laine, volants (Assézat XI : 168).

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<sup>116</sup> Our emphasis.

The use of the verb “éteinte” is powerful, the implication being that the painting resembles a fire that has gone out. One may plausibly interpret this reference to fire as a reference to the painting’s ideal ; the connotations attached to the concept of fire being passion and intense emotion, both of which have been compromised by Doyen’s lack of mastery of the technique of *vraisemblance mécanique*. Diderot continues by making further comments on the *vraisemblance mécanique* of the portrayal of the clouds that bear the saint, and the cherubim that are enveloped by the clouds. The children appear thin and light as soap bubbles and the clouds as heavy as flying balls of wool. This is another example of the influence technique may yield over ideal, as a viewer, according to Diderot, cannot be expected to respond emotionally to a painting that draws attention to its own fundamental lack of realism.

The principal defects identified by Diderot in the representation of the group of four women, comprising a mother and her servants, are form and *vraisemblance*.

J’en suis fâché, monsieur Doyen ; mais la partie la plus intéressante de votre composition, cette mère éplorée, ces suivantes qui l’entourent, ce père qui tient son enfant, tout cela est manqué net.

Premièrement, ces trois femmes et leur maîtresse font un amas confus de têtes, de bras, de jambes, de corps, un chaos où l’on se perd, et qu’on ne saurait regarder longtemps. La tête de la mère qui implore pour son fils, bien coiffée, cheveux bien ajustés, est désagréable de physionomie, sa couleur n’a point assez de consistance ; il n’y a point d’os sous cette peau ; elle manque d’action, de mouvement, d’expression ; elle a trop peu de douleur, en dépit de la larme que vous lui faites verser. Ses bras sont de verre colorié, ses jambes ne sont pas indiquées. La draperie de satin, dont elle est vêtue, forme une grande tache lumineuse. Vous avez eu beau l’éteindre après coup, elle n’en est pas restée moins discordante. Son éclat n’en éteint pas moins les chairs. Cette grande suivante que je vois par le dos, et qui la soutient, est tournée, contournée de la manière la plus déplaisante. Le bras dont elle embrasse sa maîtresse est gourde ; on ne sait sur quoi elle pose ; et puis c’est le plus énorme, le plus monstrueux cul de femme qu’on ait jamais vu ; ces effrayants culs de Bacchantes, que vous avez faits pour M. Watelet, n’en approchent pas. Cependant la draperie de cette maussade figure est bien jetée, et dessine bien le nu ; ce bras gourde est de bonne couleur et bien empâté ; il est seulement un peu équivoque et semble appartenir à la figure verte qui est à côté. Celle-ci, qui aide la première dans ses fonctions, bien sur son plan, est belle, tout à fait belle de caractère et d’expression ; mais il faut la restituer au Dominiquin. Pour celle qui est accroupie, elle est ignoble ; il y a pis, elle



ressemble en laid à sa maîtresse ; et je gagerais qu'elles ont été prises d'après le même modèle : et puis la couleur de la tête en est aussi sans consistance. À la chute des reins, qu'est-ce que cette petite lumière ? Ne voyez-vous pas qu'elle nuit à l'effet, et qu'il fallait l'éteindre ou l'étendre ? (Assézat XI : 169-170).

There are multiple technical issues addressed by Diderot in his critique of this group of figures. First, Doyen's poor command of form and *vraisemblance mécanique* is evident in that the mother and her servants are more recognisable as a chaotic heap of limbs than as individual figures. Second, each individual figure, once identified by Diderot, is characterised by individual technical issues. For instance, the head of the woman begging the Saint to save her son, while boasting a flawless hairstyle, is aesthetically disagreeable, and painted with an inconsistent palette, in such a way that no bones could believably be present beneath her skin. This reveals Doyen's lack of knowledge of human anatomy, which leads to the figure's questionable *vraisemblance mécanique*. This lack of *vraisemblance* is compounded by the figure being deprived of a sense of action and movement, and by the viewer being unable to identify any discernible expression or sense of pain in her : the only clue that we are given as to her psychological state is the rather conspicuous tear she is shedding. Diderot returns to the issue of her lack of anatomical *vraisemblance mécanique* by comparing her arms to coloured glass ; thus emphasising how excessively fragile and exceedingly unlike a flesh and blood human being she is. Diderot then continues to stress the figure's lack of *vraisemblance mécanique* by highlighting the lack of definition in her legs and in her drapery, which Diderot calls "une grande tâche lumineuse" ; accusing Doyen of employing such excessive luminosity in an attempt to draw attention away from her anatomical defects. This figure is intended to be a human being, but is not clearly identifiable as such, either in terms of her appearance or of her expression : the viewer's imagination cannot, therefore, be stimulated by her, and is unlikely to be moved by her. This comment demonstrates a clear link between technique and ideal in Diderot's thinking. According to Diderot, the other figures in this group demonstrate this link in a similar way. The servant with her back to the viewer shares the unrealistic anatomy of the mother figure. Her arm, though of convincing hue, is stiff as a board : there do not appear to be bones beneath her skin. In addition to this, the figure's arm is overly-plump, and appears to be resting on an object of some kind that is invisible to the viewer and that may very well belong to the figure next to her. An additional reason for which the viewer might find it difficult to interact with her emotionally is Diderot's description of her rear as "le plus monstrueux cul de femme qu'on ait jamais vu". The adjective "monstrueux" is

hyperbolic when used anatomically, and Diderot's vulgar choice of the word "cul" demonstrates an inability to take the figure seriously. These two terms encapsulate the reason for which a viewer would, in Diderot's opinion, find it difficult to react to this figure with compassion : she is drawn too much like a caricature to provoke much beyond laughter. Doyen's imperfect technique has once again compromised his painting's ideal. Diderot briefly, and somewhat cruelly, mentions that the only unobjectionable female figure in this group boasts beauty of form and expression because she has been plagiarised from le Dominiquain, before continuing to mention Doyen's failure to suitably master the principles of *vraisemblance poétique* in the figure of the crouching woman. According to Diderot, she only seems to be a less-attractive version of her mistress ; a sure sign that the two likenesses were taken from the same model and that the proper translation from nature to canvas has not taken place. This error in *vraisemblance poétique* is compounded by the inconsistent hue of the figure's head, as well as the presence of a small, apparently purposeless light at the figure's lower back which only compounds the problem. Doyen's inability to master the artist's craft has effectively sabotaged the viewer's ability to be inspired and moved by this group of figures.

Immediately after his analysis of the group of four women, Diderot identifies further problems of *vraisemblance poétique*, as well as of perspective, in the figures of the crying child and his father which accompany this group.

Cet enfant est bien dans son maillot ; il se tourmente bien, il crie bien ; seulement il grimace un peu. Je ne demande pas à son père plus d'expression qu'il n'en a ; pour un peu plus de dignité, c'est autre chose ; on prétend qu'il a moins l'air de l'époux de cette femme que d'un de ses serviteurs : c'est l'avis général. Pour moi, je lui trouve la simplicité, l'espèce de rusticité, la bonhomie domestique des gens de son temps. J'aime ses cheveux crépus, et j'en suis content ; sans compter qu'il a du caractère, et qu'il est on ne saurait plus vigoureusement colorié, trop peut-être, ainsi que l'enfant. Ce groupe, avançant excessivement, chasse la mère de son plan, de manière qu'on doute qu'elle puisse apercevoir la sainte à laquelle elle s'adresse ; et cette mère avec ses suivantes, chassées en avant, font paraître les figures d'en bas colossales (Assézat XI : 170-171).

In terms of expression, the child seems to be in a convincing state of pain, but also appears to be humorously pulling a face, which detracts somewhat from the viewer's ability to empathise with his situation. Diderot also approves of the expression of the father figure

accompanying the child, this despite the certainty of many at the *Salon* that this figure more closely resembles a servant than a husband. Diderot disagrees, claiming that the figure's expression captures the simplicity and domestic charm of people of that era. The father is, however, coloured a little too vibrantly, as is the child, which affects *vraisemblance poétique* as well as viewer response. For Diderot, however, the greatest problem in this group of figures is the recurring one of perspective. The figures of the father and child are painted so as to appear to be chasing the mother figure from the plane she occupies, in such a way that, were the scene really taking place, she would very likely be unable to see the Saint whose help she is soliciting. This error of perspective causes the group of four women to be propelled to the front of the painting, and consequently to appear larger than all the other figures in the painting. This is an error both of *vraisemblance poétique* and of perspective that draws attention to the lack of realism, of the painting, and thus makes it harder for the viewer to be touched.

Diderot continues to address the issue of *vraisemblance poétique* in his discussion of the feet protruding from the sewer mouth :

C'est une belle idée, bien poétique, que ces deux grands pieds nus qui sortent de la caverne ou de l'égout ; d'ailleurs ils sont beaux, bien dessinés, bien coloriés, bien vrais. Mais le haut de la caverne est vide ; et si l'on voulait me faire concevoir qu'elle regorge de cadavres, il aurait fallu l'annoncer. Il n'en est pas de ces deux pieds comme des deux bras que le Rembrandt a élevés du fond de la tombe du Lazare. Les circonstances sont différentes. Rembrandt est sublime, en ne me montrant que deux bras ; vous l'auriez été en me montrant plus de deux pieds. Je ne saurais imaginer plein un lieu que je vois vide (Assézat XI : 172).

Diderot praises the superior and poetic ideal of the two feet protruding from the sewer, as well as their colour, form and *vraisemblance mécanique*. He insists, however, that the top of the sewer appears to be empty, and that if Doyen's intention was to convey the idea of its being filled with corpses, he should have painted these cadavers rather than attempting to suggest their presence. Diderot accuses Doyen of trying, and failing, to imitate Rembrandt's painting of Lazarus, in which two arms are seen to protrude from Lazarus' tomb. Diderot does not believe that Doyen's imitation of this in *Le Miracle des Ardents* is an appropriate one, as the circumstances depicted in Rembrandt's portrayal of Lazarus' arms are quite different from those surrounding the two disembodied feet in Doyen's painting. Just as Rembrandt demonstrates sublimity in painting only two arms, Doyen might have

demonstrated sublimity of *vraisemblance poétique* had be painted more than two feet. It is impossible, in Diderot's view, to imagine a full space when faced with an empty one. The drain may be perfectly painted, as may the feet, and the idea may be a good one, but it has not been translated convincingly from reality to the canvas, thus making it difficult to capture the viewer's imagination.

In his analysis of the technique of *Le Miracle des Ardents*, Diderot stresses the importance of the line of liaison in achieving unity and harmony in a composition ; unity and harmony that play a direct role in rousing the viewer's passion.

Mais ce que j'estime surtout dans la composition de Doyen, c'est qu'à travers son fracas, tout y est dirigé à un seul et même but, avec une action et un mouvement propre à chaque figure ; toutes ont un rapport commun à la sainte, rapport dont on retrouve des vestiges, même dans les morts. Cette belle femme, qui vient d'expirer au pied du massif, a expiré en invoquant. Le cadavre effrayant, qui pend du massif, avait les bras élevés vers le ciel quand il est tombé mort comme on le voit (...)

Le Miracle des Ardents de Doyen n'est pas irrépréhensible de ce côté. La ligne de liaison y est anfractueuse, pliée, repliée, tortillée. On a de la peine à la suivre ; elle est quelquefois équivoque ; ou elle s'arrête tout court, ou il faut bien de la complaisance à l'œil pour en poursuivre le chemin.

Une composition bien ordonnée n'aura jamais qu'une seule vraie, unique ligne de liaison ; et cette ligne conduira, et celui qui la regarde, et celui qui tente de la décrire (Assézat XI : 174-175).

Despite the “fracas” of the subject matter of *Les Ardents*, each of its figures maintains individuality of pose and gesture while sustaining a connection to the central figure of Saint Géneviève and being painted in relation to her. This is evident in all the figures, both living and dead. Diderot, while approving of Doyen's ability to create unity in this way, believes that this unity is compromised by the artist's attempting to employ multiple lines of liaison instead of a single line of liaison (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 190)<sup>117</sup>. The adjectives that describe these lines of liaison, “anfractueuse, pliée, repliée, tortillée”, imply contortion and torturous folding, thus emphasising the degree of discomfort imposed on the viewer's eye. Diderot claims that these multiple lines of liaison make the action of the painting impossible to follow, and that in failing to create a coherent sense of movement in

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<sup>117</sup> In the analysis of Vien earlier in this chapter, line of liaison was discussed in detail.

the painting's great masses of figures, Doyen does not produce the semantic unity that should characterise a well-organised painting (Bukdahl 1984 in Angrémy *et al.* 1984 : 190)<sup>118</sup>. The function of the technique of the line of liaison is to create unity in the painting, to generate a sense of movement and to take the viewer's eye on a specific journey towards the painting's meaning. Without a grasp of a work's meaning, it is difficult for a viewer to respond to it or to be inspired by it. The response of the viewer is a central part of a painting's ideal. In sabotaging the viewer's ability to respond to a painting through the incorrect use of technique, Doyen has demonstrated Diderot's conviction in the symbiotic relationship between technique and ideal.

According to Bukdahl, Diderot's principal method of criticism in *Les Ardents* is "la méthode scientifique", whereby the critic begins with the central point of the painting, in this case the figure of Saint G  nevi  ve, before proceeding to the painting's other planes and dealing with them in order of importance (Bukdahl 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 190). This tendency leads Diderot to devote much attention to perspective and to its role in a painting's ideal.

Autre d  faut, et peut-  tre le plus consid  rable de tous ; c'est qu'on y d  sire une meilleure connaissance de la perspective, des plans plus distincts, plus de profondeur tout cela n'a pas assez d'air et de champ, ne recule pas, n'avance pas assez. Et le malade qui s'  lance de l'h  pital, et la m  re agenouill  e qui supplie, et les trois suivantes qui la servent, et le mari qui tient l'enfant, tous ces objets forment un chaos, une masse compacte de figures. Si, sur le fond, derri  re le p  re, vous imaginez un plan vertical, parall  le    la toile, et sur le devant un autre plan parall  le au premier, vous formerez une bo  te qui n'aura pas six pieds de profondeur, dans laquelle toutes les sc  nes de Doyen se passeront, et o   ses malades, plus entass  s que dans nos h  pitaux, p  riront   touff  s (Ass  zat XI : 175).

Doyen does not divide the painting into distinct planes in order to create depth. The effect of this, according to Diderot, is that transposed into the real world, the scene portrayed in *Le Miracle des Ardents* would not even be six feet deep. Indeed, Diderot would have us believe that in this instance, the sick figures in the painting would be more likely to suffocate than to perish from *le mal des ardents*. In failing, in this way, to properly translate nature, and to

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<sup>118</sup> This notion is challenged by Volle (in Angr  my *et al.* 1984 : 189), as Diderot does not seem to have considered the possibility of Doyen wanting to tell his story in a complicated and confused way. Volle claims that this commentary on Doyen's multiple lines of liaison shows that Diderot is ill at ease in this criticism, and condemns Doyen in order to satisfy his own belief that the action of a painting should commence at a single point and proceed along a single line of liaison.

create a credible illusion of depth in his work through perspective, Doyen has demonstrated a poor command of the technique of *vraisemblance poétique* and has compromised the viewer's ability to suspend disbelief. These errors of perspective and of *vraisemblance* make it impossible for the viewer to relate to the painting on an emotional level, as Doyen, in committing these errors, has drawn attention to the fundamental unreality of the painting that he is meant to make the viewer overlook.

At a later point in his analysis, Diderot returns to this issue of faulty perspective and states that plagiarism is to blame :

S'il est vrai, comme on le reproche à Doyen, et comme il aurait un peu de peine à s'en justifier, qu'il ait emprunté la distribution, la marche générale de sa machine, d'une composition de Rubens, où l'on prétend que l'ordonnance est la même, je ne suis plus surpris du défaut d'air et de plans ; il est presque inséparable de cette sorte de plagiat. L'estampe vous donnera bien la position des masses, la distribution des groupes, elle vous indiquera même le lieu des ombres et des lumières, à peu près le moyen de séparer les objets ; mais ce moyen sera très-difficile à transporter sur la toile. C'est le secret de l'inventeur ; il n'a imaginé son ensemble, que d'après un technique qui est le sien, et qui ne sera jamais bien le vôtre. Il est difficile d'exécuter un tableau d'après une description donnée et détaillée ; il l'est peut-être encore davantage de l'exécuter d'après une estampe ; de là l'intelligence du clair-obscur manquée ; rien qui s'éloigne, se reproche, s'unisse, se sépare, s'avance, se recule, se lie, se fuie ; plus d'harmonie, plus de netteté, plus d'effet, plus de magie (Assézat XI : 176).

This comparison with Rubens is an example of what Bukdahl calls “des modèles de comparaison” (1984 in Angrémy *et al.* 1984 : 190), whereby Diderot refines his style and supports his arguments by identifying similarities and differences between a known masterpiece and the work he is examining. In the case of *Les Ardents*, Diderot insists that Doyen has copied, from an engraving, the layout and content of a composition by Rubens, and that in light of this fact, it is hardly surprising that Doyen's perspective leaves much to be desired. Diderot claims that while an engraving may provide an accurate representation of such elements as a painting's layout, the distance between certain objects, and the intensity of the shadows and the light, it is very difficult to transpose these elements onto canvas. Diderot provides the following reason for this : “C'est le secret de l'inventeur ; il n'a imaginé son ensemble, que d'après un technique qui est le sien, et qui ne sera jamais bien le vôtre”. This reasoning is significant by virtue of its according equal importance to technique and

imaginative ideal in the creative process, which only reinforces Diderot's conviction, in this *Salon*, that the "couple technique-idéal" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>119</sup> comprises two participants in a symbiotic relationship.

It is Diderot's belief that Doyen's poor command of colour only adds to the discord and monotony that he has already identified in this artist's technique.

Ce qui achève d'augmenter la confusion, la discordance, la fatigue de l'œil, ce sont des tons jaunâtres trop voisins et trop répétés ; les nuages sont jaunâtres ; la carnation des hommes jaunâtre ; les draperies ou jaunes ou d'un rouge mêlé de teintes jaunes ; le manteau de la figure principale d'un beau jonquille ; les ornements en sont d'or ; il y a des écharpes tirant sur le jaune ; la grande suivante au derrière énorme est jaune. En faisant tout participer de la même teinte, on évite la discordance, et l'on tombe dans la monotonie. Il faut être bien malheureux pour avoir ces deux défauts à la fois (Diderot 1798 : 175).

According to Diderot, the palette of *Les Ardents* is excessively yellow, and is characterised by shades of yellow so similar to and repetitive of the others present in the painting that the overall palette only adds to the discord and lack of harmony already present in *Les Ardents* (Volle 1984 in Angremy *et al.* 1984 : 189). Diderot even goes so far as to say that the word "discordance" is an overly-complimentary description of this painting's palette and that "la monotonie" might be more appropriate. The yellow palette of *Les Ardents* does not only serve to bore the viewer, it also draws attention to the fact that the viewer is not observing reality and detaches him further from the emotionality of the painting. For this reason, it is possible to conclude that the yellow palette of *Les Ardents* is a clear example of the interdependence of the artist's tools and the feelings his work inspires.

Diderot later undergoes a change in opinion towards Doyen's colour, but is immovable in terms of its contribution (or lack of contribution) to the painting's harmony.

Il y a de la couleur ; que dis-je ? le tableau de Doyen est même très-vigoureusement coloré ; mais il manque d'harmonie ; et quoiqu'il soit chaud de toute part, on ne saurait le regarder longtemps sans être peiné ; mais c'est principalement au groupe des six figures placées sur le massif que cette peine se fait sentir. C'est un grand papillotage insupportable (Assézat XI : 176).

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<sup>119</sup> No page number provided in web document.

Diderot's use of the expression "que dis-je" in relation to the palette of *Les Ardents* shows clearly that Diderot has changed his mind about the monotony of the painting's colour and wishes to explain this change. Diderot now calls Doyen's colour vigorous and vivid, but insists on the colour's contribution to the lack of harmony ; indeed, the colour is so striking that it is hard to contemplate without feeling ill at ease. Diderot states that it is mainly the central group of six figures that is responsible for this : the group is "un grand papillotage insupportable" that provides nowhere for the eye to rest or go. Doyen's technique has impaired the imaginative quality of his painting and, in ensuring that the viewer wishes to step away from the painting rather than to draw closer to it, has also guaranteed that the viewer will not easily be moved by it in a positive way.

Though Diderot finds many faults in the artistic technique of *Les Ardents*, his final verdict on the painting is a positive one :

Avec tout ce que je viens de reprendre dans le tableau de Doyen, il est beau et très-beau ; il est chaud, il est plein d'imagination et de verve. Il y a du dessin, de l'expression, du mouvement ; beaucoup, mais beaucoup de couleur ; et il produit un grand effet. L'artiste s'y montre un homme, et un homme qu'on n'attendait pas : c'est sans contredit la meilleure de ses productions ; qu'on expose ce tableau en quelque endroit du monde que ce soit ; qu'on lui oppose quelque maître ancien ou moderne qu'on voudra ; la comparaison ne lui ôtera pas tout mérite (Assézat XI :177).

Diderot has nothing but praise for the ideal of *Les Ardents*. Not only is it described as "beau et très-beau", but as "chaud", a sure indication of the painting's intensity, and of the sometimes-unpleasant intensity of emotion it evokes in the person looking at it. Diderot finds *Les Ardents* imaginative and alive and its impact on the viewer considerable. Diderot also chooses to focus on Doyen's humanity, and the way that it has manifested itself in the painting. Doyen has shown himself to be a human being that feels deeply, and is capable of transmitting that depth onto the canvas in such a convincing way that one may compare him to any Master, both ancient and modern, and the comparison will never prove entirely to his disadvantage. Every positive comment made by Diderot in this conclusion to his analysis relates to the ideal of *Les Ardents* : to its great intensity of imagination and emotion and to its capacity to inspire both the imagination and the emotion of the viewer. The praise in this conclusion captures Doyen's mastery of ideal, and the conspicuous absence of any praise to do with his lack of mastery of technique.



In this section on Doyen, we have demonstrated on multiple occasions the artist's superior sense of his painting's ideal, and the manner in which that ideal is often compromised by an inability to realise it in the medium of paint because of his poor technique. Diderot's analysis of Doyen therefore presents convincing evidence of Diderot's conviction that technique and ideal are participants in a symbiotic relationship in the *Salon de 1767* : had Doyen's command of technique been as exceptional as his talent for ideal, *Le Miracle des Ardents* would certainly have been a great work of art.

#### 5.4 Comparison of Vien and Doyen

Throughout his critique of the works exhibited by Vien and Doyen at the *Salon de 1767*, Diderot makes a number of significant comments in which he actively compares Vien and Doyen ; comparing the strengths of one to the weaknesses of the other. These comments play an important role in Diderot's critique of these artists and their use of technique and ideal as interdependent aspects of painting.

In his article on Vien, Diderot presents Vien as an artist strong in technique and weak in ideal.

[La composition de Vien] est vraiment le contraste de celle de Doyen. Toutes les qualités qui manquent à l'un de ces artistes, l'autre les a. Il règne ici la plus belle harmonie de couleur ; une paix, un silence qui charment ; c'est toute la magie secrète de l'art sans apprêt, sans recherche, sans effort. C'est un éloge qu'on ne peut refuser à Vien, mais quand on tourne les yeux sur Doyen, qu'on voit sombre, vigoureux, bouillant et chaud, il faut s'avouer que dans la prédication tout ne se fait valoir que par une faiblesse, supérieurement entendue ; faiblesse que la force de Doyen fait sortir, mais faiblesse harmonieuse, qui fait sortir à son tour toute la discordance de son rival. Ce sont deux grands athlètes qui font un coup fourré (Assézat XI : 32).

In this extract, Diderot acknowledges the contrast that exists between the paintings by Vien and Doyen and declares that each of these artists possesses qualities that are lacking in the other. Vien's technique in the *Saint Denis*, for instance, is characterised by a harmony of colour that is truly beautiful, and his ideal is superior by virtue of the feelings of peace and silence that the painting evokes. Diderot calls this favourable combination of technique and ideal "toute la magie secrète de l'art sans apprêt, sans recherche, sans effort". This is significant, as the word "magie" had previously only been applied to ideal : here, Diderot demonstrates that the magic of art is constructed from both technique and ideal. This

favourable opinion of Vien's combination of technique and ideal to produce a great work of art is inconsistent with the views expressed by Diderot in his critique of the *Saint Denis* ; indeed, in his critique, Diderot makes frequent statements as to the virtuosity of Vien's technique and the imperfection of his ideal. Diderot contradicts himself in this way in order to further contrast the two artists : to Diderot, Vien's ideal does not appear to be objectionable, that is, until one is confronted with that of Doyen : "sombre, vigoureux, bouillant et chaud". These are highly impassioned and vivid words that perfectly capture the intensity of the horror Doyen conveys in *Les Ardents* and the effect this horror has on the viewer. The emotive force of these words also reveals an intention, on Diderot's part, to praise Doyen at Vien's expense. According to Diderot, looking at Doyen makes the viewer realise that Vien "ne se fait valoir que par une faiblesse, supérieurement entendue" : the artist's only value is a weakness that is well-executed, and this weakness is only apparent when contrasted with the strength of Doyen's ideal. Perhaps most significantly of all, Diderot then states that while the quality of Doyen's work might make the viewer disparage Vien, Vien's work has a similar effect on the viewer's response to Doyen's. Therefore, observing the work of one artist has the effect of throwing into sharp relief the weaknesses of the other. Diderot insists on this point, and to further illustrate it, makes use of the analogy of two athletes doing their utmost to sabotage each other's progress. This is an effective analogy in the context of the strengths and weaknesses of Doyen and Vien that we have identified in this chapter. Vien demonstrates good technique, but weak ideal and thus weakens his art's ability to be great. Doyen demonstrates poor technique but superior ideal, which has identical consequences in his own art.

Diderot continues this comparison of Vien and Doyen by comparing their works to their respective personalities :

Les deux compositions sont l'une à l'autre comme les caractères des deux hommes. Vien est large, sage comme le Dominiquin : de belles têtes, un dessin correct, de beaux pieds, de belles mains, des draperies bien jetées, des expressions simples et naturelles ; rien ne tourmente, rien de recherché, ni dans les détails, ni dans l'ordonnance : c'est le plus beau repos. Plus on le regarde plus on se plaît à le regarder, il tient à-la-fois du Dominiquin et de le Sueur. Le groupe de femmes qui est à gauche est très-beau. Tous les caractères de têtes paraissent avoir été étudiés d'après le premier de ces maîtres ; et le groupe des jeunes hommes qui est à droite, et de bonne couleur est dans le goût de le Sueur. Vien vous

enchaine, et vous laisse tout le temps de l'examiner (Assézat XI : 32-33).

In the above analysis of Vien, Diderot comments on the painter's greatness in ways that are almost exclusively technical. Vien is called "large [et] sage comme le Dominiquin" : he is conscious of his own greatness, but wise and restrained. His greatness may be found in his technique : Diderot mentions the beauty of the heads and feet drawn by Vien, the correctness of Vien's command of form, the *vraisemblance* of his figures' emotions ; there is nothing that torments itself or anything lacking in the details or layout. Vien's technique allows the eye to wander naturally and at its ease and to take pleasure in wandering. Diderot compares Vien to the Old Masters le Dominiquin and le Sueur ; suggesting that the group of women that appear on the left in the *Saint Denis* are studies of the finest works of these two painters, and that the group of men who appear on the right are coloured in the manner of le Sueur. Comparing Vien's technique to that of Old Masters without accusing him of plagiarism demonstrates that Diderot believes his technique to be of as fine a level as theirs.

Doyen's personality, and therefore his art, is a contrast to that of Vien:

Doyen, d'un effet plus piquant pour l'œil, semble lui dire de se dépêcher, de peur que l'impression d'un objet venant à détruire l'impression d'un autre, avant que d'avoir embrassé le tout le charme ne s'évanouisse. Vien a toutes les parties qui caractérisent un grand faiseur ; rien n'y est négligé ; un beau fond. C'est pour de jeunes gens une source de bonnes études. Si j'étais professeur, je leur dirais : "Allez à Saint-Roch, regardez *La Prédication de Denis*, laissez-vous-en pénétrer ; mais, passez vite devant le tableau des *Ardents* ; c'est un sujet sublime de tête, que vous n'êtes pas encore en état d'imiter. Vien n'a rien fait de mieux, si ce n'est peut-être son morceau de réception" (Assézat XI : 33).

Doyen seems to hurry Vien along, as though afraid that the viewer's impression of one object may destroy the impression of another before the viewer has had the opportunity to appreciate the artwork as a whole. This tendency is amply demonstrated in *Le Miracle des Ardents*, where the eye of the viewer seems to flee from plane to plane in a way that compromises the harmony of the whole. This tendency also probably accounts for Diderot's declaration that Vien is a good "faiseur" (practitioner of technique) and therefore a respectable source of imitation for young painters ; the implication being that Doyen is not. To demonstrate his point, Diderot observes that if he were a teacher, he would tell his learners to go to Saint-Roch and look at *Saint Denis* in detail, but not to look at *Les Ardents*

because it is “un sujet sublime de tête” that they are not ready to imitate. This implies that while Doyen’s superiority to Vien lies in his emotional maturity, which people who are learning to paint cannot yet learn to imitate, Vien’s fine technique is something that learners should be encouraged to imitate from the beginning of their training. Making Vien what we may call a textbook artist accords him a certain status: Diderot confirms this by stating that apart, perhaps, from his *morceau de réception* for the Académie, Vien has not done anything better. This turns out to be a rather strange compliment, however, as Diderot goes on to claim, as we have investigated earlier, that Vien “dessine bien, peint bien, mais il ne pense ni ne sent”. In making this claim, Diderot effectively states that while Vien may be a master of technique, he is not a man of feeling and can never, therefore, be what Doyen already is : a master of ideal.

Diderot also compares the two artists in his article on Doyen :

Vien et Doyen ont retouché leurs tableaux en place. Je ne les ai point vus ; mais allez à Saint-Roch et quoi qu’ait pu faire Doyen, je gage que son tableau, après vous avoir appelé par une bonne couleur générale, vous repoussera toujours par la discordance. Je gage que son effet vous fatiguera ; qu’il n’y a point de plans, mais point ; rien de décidé ; qu’on ne sait toujours où posent les figures du parvis ; que cette grosse suivante à énorme derrière rouge, au lieu d’être large, continue d’être monstrueuse et mal assise ; qu’il n’y a point de repos ; que vous y ressentez partout *la furia francese*; qu’à juger de la figure qui tient le petit enfant, par le plan qu’on lui suppose, elle est d’une grandeur colossale, et cœtera, et cœtera. Ces vices ne se corrigent pas à la pointe du pinceau ; *ma, comé ogni medaglia ha il suo reverso*, le bas de son tableau sera toujours beau; la couleur en sera toujours chaude, vigoureuse et vraie. Le groupe des deux figures, dont l’une se déchire les flancs (quoiqu’il y ait peut-être dans Rubens, ou ailleurs, un possédé que Doyen ait regardé), sera toujours d’un grand maître ; que s’il a pris cette figure, c’est *ut conditor et non ut interpres* ; et que ce Greuze qui lui en fait le reproche n’a qu’à se taire, car il ne serait pas difficile de lui cogner le nez sur certains tableaux flamands où l’on retrouve des attitudes, des incidents, des expressions, trente accessoires dont il a su profiter, sans que ses ouvrages en perdent rien de leur mérite (Assézat XI : 179).

At the beginning of his comparison, Diderot observes that both Vien and Doyen have had to touch up their paintings on site. He has not seen these new versions of the paintings, but proposes that if one were to go to Saint-Roch and to approach Doyen’s painting, one would be drawn to it because of its striking colour, only to be repelled by its discord and general

lack of harmony. According to Diderot, the immediate effect of *Les Ardents* is to tire out the viewer. He re-iterates Doyen's faulty perspective brought on by the absence of well-structured planes, with the repetition of the negative "point" emphasising this absence. Doyen's inability to master perspective also has the unfortunate consequence of removing any sense of resolution from the action of the painting. Because the figures seem to be continually forced from their proper planes of perspective, there is no place for the viewer's eye to rest. The exhaustion caused to the viewer by this unfortunate fact is effectively evoked by Diderot through the use of the military term *la furia francese*. First observed by Caesar in his *Gallic Wars*, this expression is used to describe the French nation (or the Gaulish nation, in Caesar's case) in a state of war. The term *la furia francese* suggests that when at war, the French are intelligent and cunning, but unpredictable and ill-disciplined ; qualities that can be both advantageous and detrimental:

[In the field], the French are brave, audacious to temerity, disobedient to their leaders, showing little foresight, constancy or perseverance, greedy for money, easy to corrupt, quickly depressed if food or wine be lacking, neglectful of setting guards or keeping reserves, hence easily attacked from the flank or rear (Weber 1990: 175).

*La furia francese* is therefore an extremely evocative description of the effect Diderot claims *Le Miracle des Ardents* to have on the viewer : Doyen is brave in what we might call "the field", but has no definite or logical purpose in mind in of enabling the viewer to engage with him. Just as an army in the grip of *la furia francese* shows little foresight or respect for authority, Doyen has sought to break the rules of art without mastering them or attempting to understand their value. In other words, he has ignored the principles of technique without realising the purpose they serve.

Diderot does not, however, choose to condemn the entire painting on the basis of *la furia francese* ; declaring that just as every coin has two sides, the lower half of *Les Ardents* will always be beautiful, particularly the two figures, of which one is clutching his sides. Diderot takes a moment to once again accuse Doyen of plagiarising Rubens. He then makes it clear that he does not intend the accusation to be an insult ; declaring that Greuze, a great painter, in Diderot's view, has frequently plagiarised from Flemish painting without his works losing their merit. Diderot then continues to praise the lower half of *Les Ardents* ; observing that is indicative of a superior talent in Doyen :

Le bas du tableau de Doyen annonce vraiment un grand talent ; qu'il mette un peu de plomb dans sa tête ; que ses compositions deviennent plus sages, plus décidées ; que les figures en soient mieux assises ; qu'il n'entasse plus tête sur tête ; qu'il étudie plus les grands maîtres ; qu'il s'éprenne davantage de la simplicité ; qu'il soit plus harmonieux, plus sévère, moins fougueux, moins éclatant ; et vous verrez le coin qu'il tiendra dans l'école française. Il a du feu, mais trop de petits effets qui nuisent à l'ensemble. Il perd à être détaillé, mais il sent, mais il sent fortement. C'est un grand point. Laissez-le aller, vous dis-je (Assézat XI : 180).

Diderot, while clearly acknowledging the talent demonstrated by Doyen in the lower half of *Les Ardents*, advises caution : he counsels Doyen to be wiser in his compositions, particularly in their layout and their technique. He recommends that Doyen study the Old Masters, embrace simplicity and harmony, and attempt to be a little less fervent and a little less scintillating. Doyen is passionate, but his work is characterised by so many technical errors that the excellence of the totality of his work is compromised. This advice to Doyen clearly demonstrates Diderot's conviction that technique and ideal are interdependent in the production of great art, since Doyen's passion and imagination can only accomplish so much if they are expressed through poor technique.

The "exhaustion" that Doyen's work provokes in Diderot continues to be a concern for the philosopher when he returns to the comparison of Doyen with Vien :

Vien a moins perdu à Saint-Roch que Doyen : Vien y est resté simple, sage et harmonieux ; Doyen fatigant, papillotant, inégal, vigoureux. Les figures du bas vous y paraîtront beaucoup trop fortes pour les autres.

Donnez à Vien la verve de Doyen, qui lui manque ; donnez à Doyen le faire de Vien, qu'il n'a pas ; et vous aurez deux grands artistes. Mais cela est peut-être impossible, du moins cette alliance ne s'est point encore vue ; et le premier de tous les peintres n'est que le second, dans toutes les parties de la peinture (Assézat XI : 180).

Diderot begins by attesting that of the two artists commissioned to paint for the Église Saint-Roch, Vien has succeeded the best : he remains simple and harmonious, whereas Doyen remains exhausting, disorganised yet vigorous. Diderot does not for a moment suggest that Vien is Doyen's superior however, and makes his final statement regarding the shortcomings of each artist which so ironically represent the strengths of the other. Diderot suggests gifting

Vien with Doyen's "verve" and Doyen with Vien's "faire". This proposal effectively suggests presenting Vien with ideal and Doyen with technique, the term "verve" possessing connotations of flair, eloquence and expression in what is painted, the term "faire" indicative of all that concerns doing and constructing ; with how a subject is painted. If Vien, the master of technique, had had a better knowledge of ideal, and Doyen, the master of ideal, a better knowledge of technique, the works of art produced by them might have been of a much higher standard. Diderot's suggestions for the improvement of each artist are therefore indicative of his conviction, at the time of this *Salon de 1767*, in the interdependence of technique and ideal in the creation of great art.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The conclusion to this dissertation will comprise four parts. In the first part, we will provide a brief summary of our findings in each chapter, with a view to establishing if this study on Diderot's *Salons* from 1759 to 1767 has indeed validated the hypothesis that Diderot comes to see technique and ideal as participants in an interdependent relationship in painting. In the second part of the conclusion, we will discuss the importance of the research undertaken in this study and to what extent it has added to existing research on Diderot's aesthetic. In the third part, suggestions will be made as to how new avenues of research may be pursued. Finally, we will discuss the importance of art criticism, and its place in today's world.

#### 6.1 Findings

Our goal in this study was to establish how, and to what extent, Diderot's art criticism in five *Salons*, spanning eight years, from 1759 to 1767, expresses an understanding of the two components of artistic expression: imagination and mastery of the artist's craft, or, in Diderotian terms, ideal and technique. The study, through analysis of key articles in the above *Salons*, aimed to determine if and how Diderot's awareness develops from these concepts being considered separate and unrelated, in the *Salon de 1759*, to their being considered as interdependent in the *Salon de 1767*. The study also made use of Bourdieu's sociological theory of art perception and Barthes' theory relating to texts of pleasure and texts of bliss. We chose to adopt Bourdieu as a theoretical framework because Diderot's journey from the ignorance of technique to an understanding of its role in artistic expression, corresponds with Bourdieu's own ideas on the role of the viewer's artistic competence in the aesthesis or delight, of his aesthetic experience. Barthes' theory relating to the reader's perception of certain texts as "texts of pleasure", "texts of bliss" or a combination of the two, was adopted in order to aid our understanding of how Diderot's creation of modern art criticism through the advancement of the "couple technique-idéal" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>120</sup> expressed a deep love for culture and a simultaneous desire to destroy it.

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<sup>120</sup> No page number provided in web document.



We attempted to ascertain Diderot's understanding of the development of the artist's craft and his ability to move the viewer in three of the six chapters. Chapter 3 was devoted to the early *Salons* of 1759, 1761 and 1763; Chapter 4 discussed the *Salon de 1765*; Chapter 5 was dedicated to the *Salon de 1767*, which may be called Diderot's *magnum opus* of aesthetics.

In the first of these three chapters, we observed Diderot at work as a novice art critic with apparently scant awareness that the elements of technique and ideal were equally-important components in artistic expression. As a man of letters, he was gripped by the tendency to focus on a work's ideal, which Bukdahl has defined as "contenu [de la peinture], imagination, connaissance de littérature" (1980: 328) and to overlook the role of the different components of the technique of painting in bringing about such ideal.

The first part of Chapter 3, namely our treatment of the *Salon de 1759*, was divided into two sections. In the first section, we demonstrated Diderot's ignorance of the artist's craft by examining certain critiques in which it is not mentioned at all, namely Diderot's articles on Jeaurat's *Chartreux en méditation* and Bachelier's *Résurrection*. Diderot's analyses of both these artists revealed a significant emphasis on ideal. In his critique of Jeaurat, none of the elements of technique, such as composition, colour, perspective and *chiaroscuro*, amongst others, was mentioned. The stress was on accuracy in content and on what the Abbé Du Bos called "la vraisemblance mécanique" or the painting of nature without alteration. Diderot claimed that the lack of resemblance between Jeaurat's painting and the real world impeded the viewer's ability to respond emotionally. In this concentration on the subject matter of the painting, the philosopher criticised Jeaurat's faulty imagination, and suggested that he compensate for it by going out into nature and copying what he sees. Since imagination and content fall within the domain of ideal, we concluded that Diderot's analysis of *Chartreux en méditation* was driven by a favouring of ideal and a lack of attention to and knowledge about technique. When we moved from Diderot's article on Jeaurat to his scathing critique of Bachelier's *Résurrection*, we identified a similar privileging of ideal and ignorance of technique. In the article on Bachelier, Diderot made minimal technical comments before moving on to the work's inability to inspire emotion by virtue of its poor content and *vraisemblance mécanique*. To Diderot, Bachelier's Christ appeared to possess dislocated limbs and a clownish facial expression that the philosopher found to be at odds with the poignant subject matter. Content and *vraisemblance mécanique* being the province of ideal, we concluded that Diderot's article on Bachelier's *Résurrection*, as in Jeaurat's *Chartreux en*

*méditation*, was characterised by concentrated attention on ideal and a disregard of the role of technique in a painting's artistic expression.

In the second section of our analysis of the *Salon de 1759*, we investigated certain rare instances where Diderot mentions both technique and ideal ; this with a view to ascertaining whether there was evidence of a recognition of the interrelatedness of the two concepts. To achieve this, we analysed Diderot's critiques of La Grenée's *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils* and Carle Van Loo's *Jason et Médée*. In his article on the former, Diderot criticises La Grenée for the poor command of spatial elements that leads to a largely-empty canvas populated by figures incapable of inspiring interest or emotion. This connection made by Diderot between a knowledge of technique and a painting's effect on the viewer was not openly acknowledged by the philosopher. We concluded, however, that knowledge of such a connection could exist "unconsciously" in Diderot's mind ; this because of the clear link he makes between spatial elements and viewer response in this critique. We came to a similar conclusion in our discussion of Diderot's article on Carle Van Loo's *Jason et Médée*. In this article, Diderot is profoundly critical about the painting's theatrical artificiality, particularly its garish colour, claiming that these flaws cause the viewer to respond to the painting with coldness. Here too, the philosopher does not verbalise the possibility that technique and ideal are related, and we once again concluded that though the two elements were not verbally acknowledged, there was a possibility that they were seen to be linked in Diderot's unconscious.

In the second part of Chapter 3, we moved on to the *Salon de 1761*. We noted the presence of a number of references to technical details such as composition and colour and established that this apparently new awareness was as a consequence of Diderot having spent more time in the company of artists, and was a result of his reading of aesthetic treatises such as da Vinci and de Piles in an attempt to better understand the process of creating art on canvas. However beneficial these associations and readings would later prove to be for a holistic art criticism, we found that in this particular *Salon*, Diderot's emphasis on ideal had not diminished, nor had his tendency to let his enthusiasm for imagination and emotional responses lead his opinions. Diderot's theories on drama as laid down in such works as *Le Fils Naturel* and *De la poésie dramatique* had much occupied him at this time, and it was through these theories that he attempted to solve the problems of *ekphrasis* in his critique of Greuze's *L'Accordée du Village*. In this second part of Chapter 3, we undertook to investigate

the influence of these theories on Diderot's critique of Greuze, both in terms of technique and in terms of ideal. We did so with a view to ascertaining whether Diderot's perception of these two concepts had changed at this point. We found Diderot's article on Greuze to be driven by his predilection for the ideal expressed in a painting, although we did conclude that comments on technical mastery were made in significantly greater detail than in the previous *Salon de 1759*. We found that these comments had been influenced by Diderot's conviction that the heightening of the viewer's emotion through the presentation of the painting as a *tableau dramatique* could give art a moral and didactic purpose. Thus, once again, at this chronological juncture, technique was seen by Diderot to be subordinate to ideal.

The third and final part of Chapter 3 was devoted to the *Salon de 1763*. This *Salon* proved to be significant in that Diderot demonstrated a significantly greater knowledge and privileging of technique than in the other two early *Salons* discussed in this chapter. We demonstrated this through Diderot's apparent realisation of the importance of the Abbé Du Bos' concept of *la vraisemblance poétique*, namely the notion that a painting cannot represent a copy of nature so much as a translation of it. This "translation", or "re-working" of nature, is not achieved through ideal, Diderot noted, but through harmony and proportion, elements of art that are technical in nature. In order to validate Diderot's new and unprecedented attention to the craft of art, an analysis of Diderot's critique of Carle Van Loo's *Les Grâces enchaînées par l'amour* brought to light many comments touching on the translation of the beauty of women from real life to canvas. We also identified a greater concentration on a myriad of different technical elements, including the accurate portrayal of skin tone, hair colour, drapery, proportion, and particularly, colour. According to Diderot, the technical shortcomings of this nature in Van Loo's painting, drew attention to the fundamental lack of realism of the painting and thus prevented the beholder from engaging with it in an imaginative manner. Diderot's new respect for technique was made all the more evident by his admission, at the end of this article, that as someone with no experience in the art of painting, his critique may very well be lacking. This comment was found to temper his usually very confident criticism and views on the value of a painting. While the *Salon de 1763* proved to be important with regards to Diderot's development as an art critic, as well as with regards to his verbal recognition of the importance of technique, we were still unable to identify a definitive link made by Diderot between technique and ideal. We did, however, conclude that Diderot's favouring of technique in this *Salon* was an important step towards an

awareness and acknowledgment that technique is part of the visual process of expressing imagination.

In Chapter 4, devoted to the *Salon de 1765*, we began by noting the importance of this *Salon* in terms of Diderot's construction of what Lojkin calls a "couple herméneutique" (2009)<sup>121</sup> comprising both technique and ideal. In this *Salon*, Diderot abandons his exclusive attention to ideal and begins to express a view that technique does not only serve some minor purpose in the creation of great art, but impacts directly on the sublimity of a painting's ideal. He also acknowledges that ideal has a similar impact on technique, and that the greatest perfection of technique imaginable could not redeem an artist with a poor sense of imagination and emotion. In coming to this realisation, Diderot did not only acknowledge the interdependent relationship between technique and ideal, but transformed this new understanding into the fundamental method for the evaluation of artistic creation. In so doing, he demonstrated the high level of artistic competence that Bourdieu states as being imperative in the transition from aesthesis to delight in a particular individual's aesthetic experience.

In this chapter, our goal was to observe Diderot's construction and employment of the pairing of technique and ideal. We endeavoured to achieve this through an investigation of Diderot's articles of Bachelier's *Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile* and *La Charité Romaine*, as well as Fragonard's *Corésus et Callirhoé*. The philosopher judged these three paintings to be imperfect because of the disjunction between technique and ideal that characterises them. This *Salon* is therefore a turning point in the development of Diderot's art criticism.

In Diderot's critique of one of Bachelier's *Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile*, the philosopher criticised the presentation of the hostile dynamic between the two figures in the painting, namely the slave and her mistress, who are engaged in the banal act of handing over and receiving of a letter. This bizarre dynamic spurs Diderot to embark on a discussion regarding the importance of a great idea or concept in the subject matter of a particular work of art. The philosopher offers Chardin as the only exception to this rule, as the latter's mastery of technique is so sublime that even the most uneducated viewer responds to it with emotion. This discussion of Chardin, and Bachelier's inferiority to him, leads the philosopher to conclude that in the creation of great art, "le mieux serait de réunir les deux, et la pensée piquante et l'exécution heureuse" (Assézat X: 295). "La pensée

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<sup>121</sup> No page number provided in web document.

piquante” being an evident reference to imagination or vision, and “l’exécution heureuse” to the craft of painting; we concluded that it was with this statement that Diderot asserts, verbally and categorically that the two components of artistic expression, technique and ideal, must not only be independently admirable, but must work in concert in order to create a great work of art.

Following this *moment clé* in the development of Diderot’s perception of the interdependence of the artist’s tools and the imaginative vision that the artist wishes to convey, Diderot goes on to apply this understanding throughout the *Salon de 1765*.

Diderot’s critique of *La Charité Romaine* highlights the artist’s poor mastery of technique and how this fact plays a central role in emotionally detaching the viewer from the subject matter. According to Diderot, the rendition of the two figures, is marred by their grotesque form, with the figure of the old man being described as both monstrous and inhuman. This is an example of Diderot showing a Barthesian love of cultural norms and a disdain for their destruction, as the bizarreness of the forms created by Bachelier causes the viewer to react with horror despite the pathos of the subject matter, an imprisoned woman offering her breast as nourishment to a starved, pitiful old man. In demonstrating such a poor mastery of his craft, continues Diderot, Bachelier succeeds in the complete destruction of the artistic expression of his subject. In this critique, Diderot considers that technique is an indispensable component of artistic expression and that these two elements of art do not and cannot exist independently but are in fact interdependent.

We consequently noted that the critique of Fragonard’s *Corésus et Callirhoé*, following on from the one above, is particularly complex, as it takes the form of a series of *tableaux dramatiques*, placed within the framework of a dialogue with Grimm. In this critique, Diderot declares the painting’s ideal to be sublime, but slightly lacking in the technical proficiency that would make it even more so. We observed Diderot’s identification of a number of technical errors, which were said to impede the emotional or imaginative response of the beholder. This highlighting, and linking, of facets of the paintings’ execution which have a negative impact on the vision Fragonard was attempting, mark another stage in the development of Diderot’s perception that vision and execution work together in great art. In this critique, the philosopher notes inaccuracies of form leading to the emasculation of certain key figures, such as the feminine appearance of Corésus’ robes and the hermaphroditic appearance of his acolytes. He also identifies certain formal problems in the figure of

Callirhoé that impact negatively on the painting's ideal : she appears to be sleeping rather than fainting, and her robes seem to be too tight around her legs. Another central technical issue recognised by Diderot was Fragonard's meagre use of colour, which mutes the painting's expressive qualities. Diderot does not, however, go so far as to suggest that the painting's ideal was significantly compromised by this fact. He insists that the ideal is sublime, and that the artist would be afforded a greater knowledge of technique by time and by experience. This statement, together with comments regarding the impact of Fragonard's technique on the ideal of this painting, led us to conclude that in the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot constructs a definitive link between technique and ideal and is convinced that these two concepts work together in the production of great art.

The *Salon de 1767*, the subject of our study in Chapter 5, established that while Diderot's critique was underpinned by the perception of a symbiosis between technique and ideal in great painting, in this *Salon*, it is put into practice on a much greater scale. We found Diderot's pairing of technique and ideal to be particularly well-demonstrated in the philosopher's critiques of Vien's *Saint Denis prêchant la foi en France* and Doyen's *Le Miracle des Ardents* and the comparisons he makes between the two artists. Diderot's ultimate conclusion about these two artists is that Vien is possessed of superb technique and deficient ideal, and Doyen of sublime ideal and imperfect technique.

In our analysis of Diderot's commentary on Vien, we observed Diderot's praise of Vien's technique in terms of form, light, unity and line of liaison. The *Saint Denis* was described as the epitome of technical perfection. Ideal, however, was found to be profoundly lacking : "Vien dessine bien, peint bien ; mais il ne pense ni ne sent" (Assézat XI : 35). Diderot makes a number of proposals for the improvement of Vien's subject matter. Chief among these is the suggestion that components of technique, along with the *choix du moment*, be changed, thus altering both Vien's use of the artist's tools and the work's thematic composition.

Following this reconstruction of Vien's work, Diderot contradicts all of his assertions regarding the emotional coldness of Vien's work. The philosopher suggests that this *froideur* could be attributed to a technical and scientific need for large masses to be portrayed as immobile in order for a painting to achieve equilibrium. Following Diderot's statement that the reader was free to accept or reject this new argument, we adopted the latter course in favour of Diderot's initial conclusion, namely that a greater command of ideal wedded to the *Saint Denis'* superb technique, would have produced a better painting.

Diderot's critique of Doyen follows similar lines, except that it is the artist's craft that proves to be disadvantageous. Diderot identifies numerous technical issues in *Les Ardents* : perspective is faulty, disparate events are placed in the same, unlikely locale, and the yellowish palette frequently mars the painting's expressive qualities. The work's technical qualities are further impaired by Doyen's inaccurate translation of events from real life to the canvas : these include facial expression; the anatomical unfeasibility of a number of figures; and the portrayal of groups of figures that more closely resemble convoluted piles of limbs. Diderot further states that Doyen tends, as a result of bad technique, to draw attention to the fundamental irrationalism of the painting through the use of convoluted lines of liaison which leave no place for the eye to rest, and thus no room for the heart to react. This criticism focussing on artistic technique is counterbalanced by the ideal of *Les Ardents*, which Diderot finds to be sublime, poetical, frightening and a consequence of great emotional maturity. We concluded therefore that in this critique of Doyen, the philosopher considers that *Les Ardents* succeeds by virtue of its poetry: the technique employed in its execution is poor, and the painting would have demonstrated stronger ideal had such ideal been conveyed through technique capable of doing it justice. Again here, as in the critique of Vien above, form and content, visual lines and the heart, technique and ideal are treated as interdependent.

In our analysis of the comparisons made by Diderot between the two artists, we were able to confirm that Diderot found Vien to be at a high level of technical proficiency, but that he focused so much on technique that his work seemed cold and emotionless. We were also able to confirm that Diderot found Doyen to be imaginative and highly emotional, but that his inability to convey this emotion was tarnished by his poor technique. Since one artist lacks technique and the other lacks ideal, and the work of both suffers for it, Diderot's comparison of Vien and Doyen demonstrates the importance of the "couple technique-idéal" (Lojkin 2009)<sup>122</sup> in the production of great art.

Following our investigation of whether Diderot perceives the development of an interdependent relationship between technique and ideal between the *Salon de 1759* and the *Salon de 1767*, we are able to conclude that this is indeed in the case. In the *Salons de 1759*, *1761* and *1763*, Diderot tends to employ aesthesis in his criticism and does not recognise the role played by the artist's craft in bringing about ideal. In the *Salon de 1765*, he recognises the importance of technique in bringing about ideal and begins to employ the relationship as a

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<sup>122</sup> No page number provided in web document.

method of art criticism. Finally, in the *Salon de 1767*, Diderot puts the “couple technique-ideal” (Lojkine 2009)<sup>123</sup> into practice as a means of determining the greatness of a work of art.

## 6.2 Contribution to existing scholarship

Regarding the contribution of this research to existing scholarship on Diderot’s aesthetic and his *Salons*, we noted that our research question, namely the development of Diderot’s perception of technique and ideal in his *Salons*, an integral part of Diderot’s aesthetic, has been dealt with by many scholars in a manner that tends to underestimate its importance. Our goal was not to discuss Diderot status as the father of modern art criticism, but to document his journey to that position and to understand why scholars accord him this status. In order to demonstrate the manner in which we have recorded Diderot’s journey, and the reason that this is important, we will employ one of Diderot’s own methods of criticism, and make use of an analogy.

In 1773, Diderot undertook a long and arduous journey to Saint Petersburg, at the invitation of Catherine the Great (Gorbatov 2007 : 216). There were many stops taken along the way, the most important being at The Hague. Diderot enjoyed Holland, and spent the whole summer of 1773 there, touring Haarlem, Amsterdam and Zaandam. Catherine, meanwhile, was growing impatient that the philosopher she had been inviting to Russia for years was taking so long to arrive. After three letters to Diderot’s friend Falconet, who was resident in Saint Petersburg working on his famous statue of Peter the Great, Catherine sent a certain Aleksei Vasilievich Narychkin, a young man of good family, to fetch Diderot at The Hague and to ensure his prompt arrival in Saint Petersburg. The two men left The Hague on the 20 August 1773, and together endured a long and difficult journey, with Diderot suffering frequent indispositions over worse roads than was necessary. The reason for this was that Narychkin was in a rush to reach Saint Petersburg in time for the wedding of the heir presumptive, the Grand Duke Paul<sup>124</sup>. Before the voyage had even started, Narychkin, the soul of courtesy, assured Diderot that he would take great pleasure in conversing with such an eminent philosopher during the long journey. We can imagine how Diderot’s knowledge of Russia must have improved, and indeed how Narychkin’s knowledge of almost everything else must have improved during the interminable hours together in the carriage, sometimes

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<sup>123</sup> No page number provided in web document.

<sup>124</sup> Incidentally, the Grand Duke’s marriage to Wilhelmina of Hesse-Darmstadt had been facilitated by none other than Grimm (Gorbatov 2007: 216).



for two days at a stretch. But their conversation was not to end there. When the two men arrived in Saint Petersburg the day before the royal wedding, and Diderot's welcome by his friend Falconet turned out to be frostier than anticipated, Narychkin immediately invited Diderot to stay with him, an invitation that the philosopher readily accepted for the next six months (Gorbatov 2007 : 216).

Let us envision Diderot's trip to Russia, starting in Paris and ending in Saint Petersburg, as his lifelong journey with aesthetics and aesthetic thought. In the carriage, there is Diderot, and a not-too-significant individual that he barely knows, but who welcomes the idea of conversing with him : Narychkin, or, in this particular dissertation, ourselves. We are not able to accompany Diderot for the entire journey. We cannot see him setting off from Paris, fresh and enthusiastic as he works on his early aesthetic treatises or on the *Encyclopédie*, nor will we have the opportunity to observe him in the final, exhausting stretch of the *Salons de 1769* through *1781*, deathly ill and without his wig, which he has inexplicably lost *en route* (Gorbatov 2007: 217). All that we can do is see Diderot from The Hague – the *Salon de 1759* – to the Russian border – the *Salon de 1767*. Our experience is incomplete, but is valuable nonetheless, because we have accompanied Diderot on the most important part of his aesthetic journey. It is on our part of the journey that Diderot develops an idea that will not only define his entire aesthetic, but that will lead him to pioneer a new genre of art criticism. This idea is the notion that great art, and indeed great art criticism, must be made up of two equally important concepts that cannot be separated from each other : the technical part of art, and the ideal part. In documenting our journey with Diderot, we have shown how he became the father of modern art criticism by making various stops (i.e. writing various *Salons*) along the way. We have not chosen to focus on certain stops only, or on certain aspects of certain stops. We have shown what he learned at each stop, what he left behind and how he expressed his decision to do both through experimenting with literary forms such as *tableaux dramatiques* and dialogues.

From our small, cramped space inside the carriage, we, like both Diderot and Narychkin, could choose to a certain degree what we wanted to talk about, but we have also travelled through and observed the scholarly landscape that makes up the scenery around us. As Diderot does in the dialogues that characterise so much of his work, we have often stopped to seek out an array of people who can provide us with detailed information about where we are and where we are going. They, knowing the territory far better than us, provided us with

much more information than we did them, but to their knowledge we managed to add a few small elements.

Chouillet (1970), Bukdahl (1980) and De Fontenay (1981), provided us with much insight into the nature of the place we were trying to reach. But when the conversation turned to the paradoxes that we would encounter along the way in the person of our travelling companion, the advice of these three sages was diverse. Chouillet and Bukdahl insisted that Diderot's love of contradiction was a philosophical technique ; a means of expressing, through the appearance of insanity the truth of Diderot's lifelong search for unity in a work of art. De Fontenay respectfully disagreed with this perspective, and suggested that Diderot's paradoxicality had no great purpose at all : it was simply a part of the philosopher's vibrant personality. Our suggestion was that perhaps Diderot's paradoxicality was his way of allowing the reader to agree or disagree with him ; an intention that is made clear in the *Salon de 1767*, when Diderot tells the reader to accept or reject his declaration that Vien's ideal is cold because technique demands it.

With Fried (1980), we talked about the absorptive state in art, and how the sight of figures absorbed in their own affairs could provoke a similar state of immersion in the viewer. Fried attributed such absorption to the influence of dramatic theories on art, particularly in the *Salons* of the late 1760's. According to Fried, the influence of such dramatic theories ensured that the theatrical presentation of an immersed subject could create absorption in the viewer. We agreed that this was true, but added that while it was of supreme importance to determine how absorption could be created, it should also be established what factors of artistic technique or ideal could impede absorption, and thus the aesthetic experience of the beholder. As an example, we offered Diderot's critique of *Les Grâces enchaînées par l'amour* in the *Salon de 1763*, wherein the philosopher declares that the painting's garish colour makes it impossible to look at. Our conclusion was that if a painting is impossible to look at, the beholder's aesthetic experience will be significantly diminished.

Thus, in this section of Chapter 6, we have identified three significant ways in which the dissertation has added to existing research. The first and most important is its attempt to establish why Diderot is considered the father of modern art criticism by tracing the development of "l'opposition de base pour penser et pour évaluer le processus de la création

artistique” (Lojkin 2009)<sup>125</sup>: the development of his perception of the relationship between technique and ideal. The second reason is our treatment of Diderot’s paradoxicality as a characteristic of the philosopher’s writings that the reader may choose to accept or reject. The third reason is the manner in which the dissertation attempts to establish not merely how a viewer may be mesmerised by the successful combination of technique and ideal, but how he may be repulsed by the opposite.

### 6.3 Suggestions for further research

In our opinion, a logical way to proceed with new research would be to establish whether or not Diderot continues to employ the interdependent relationship between technique and ideal as a framework of reference, or means of art criticism, in his other aesthetic treatises. Prominent among these are the *Essais sur la peinture* (1766), which Diderot intended as a follow-up to the *Salon de 1765*. As Diderot states at the end of that particular *Salon*:

Après avoir décrit et jugé quatre à cinq cents tableaux, finissons par produire nos titres ; nous devons cette satisfaction aux artistes que nous avons maltraités ; nous la devons aux personnes à qui ces feuilles sont destinées. C’est peut-être un moyen d’adoucir la critique sévère que nous avons faite de plusieurs productions, que d’exposer franchement les motifs de confiance qu’on peut avoir dans nos jugements. Pour cet effet, nous oserons donner un petit Traité de peinture, et parler à notre manière et selon la mesure de nos connaissances, du dessin, de la couleur, du clair-obscur, de l’expression et de la composition (Assézat X : 453-454).

In this extract, Diderot feels the need to present what we may call his credentials, both to the readers of the *Salons* and to the artists whose works he has critiqued and criticised in a severe manner. He believes that he must prove himself to be sufficiently knowledgeable of art if he is to set himself up in a position of criticism. In order to achieve this goal, he proposes to write what he calls “un petit Traité de peinture” in which to discuss his ideas on technique, namely colour, *chiaroscuro*, expression and composition (Duflo 2007 in ed. Cammagre and Talon-Hugon 2007: 42-43).

In the *Essais sur la peinture* themselves, Diderot undertakes a number of technical discussions in a thoroughly modest way and gives each separate section charming little titles such as *Mes pensées bizarres sur le dessin* (Chapter 1) and *Paragraphe sur la composition, où j’espère que j’en parlerai* (Chapter 5). However, it is Chapter 2, *Mes petites idées sur la*

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<sup>125</sup> No page number provided in web document.

*couleur*, which is particularly interesting in terms of furthering the research undertaken in this dissertation. In the opening sentences of this particular chapter, Diderot makes the following comment on the subject of the difference between an artist's command of form, and his command of colour :

C'est le dessin qui donne la forme aux êtres ; c'est la couleur qui leur donne la vie. Voilà le souffle divin qui les anime (...) Si vous le voyez arranger bien symétriquement ses teintes et ses demi-teintes tout autour de sa palette, ou si un quart d'heure de travail n'a pas confondu tout cet ordre, prononcez hardiment que cet artiste est froid, et qu'il ne fera rien qui vaille. C'est le pendant d'un lourd et pesant érudit qui a besoin d'un passage, qui monte à son échelle, prend et ouvre son auteur, vient à son bureau, copie la ligne dont il a besoin, remonte à l'échelle, et remet le livre à sa place. Ce n'est pas là l'allure du génie. Celui qui a le sentiment vif de la couleur, a les yeux attachés sur sa toile; sa bouche est entr'ouverte ; il halète; sa palette est l'image du chaos. C'est dans ce chaos qu'il trempe son pinceau ; et il en tire l'œuvre de la création (Assézat X : 468).

In this extract, Diderot accords life-giving properties to what is merely a technical element of art : colour is described as “le souffle divin” that animates the figures portrayed in the painting, so god-like in its power that it is able to animate other kinds of technique, such as form, in its goal of giving life. Is there any more eloquent way to describe ideal, for example, than as that which gives a painting life? Yet in this extract, it is not merely ideal that brings such life to a painting: it is the god-like technique of colour that is used to create ideal.

Diderot continues his discussion of colour by bestowing divinity on the artist himself, which he often does when talking about great colourists (Duflo 2007 in ed. Cammagre and Talon-Hugon 2007 : 44). It is interesting, however, that Diderot's great colourist can only truly possess the divine ability of giving life to art if he embraces chaos. The artist's palette and surroundings must be the very incarnation of disorder, as must his emotional state, for it is from such disorder that the artist “pulls” what he has created. Diderot claims that if an artist occupies himself with the neat arrangement of colours around him, if his palette is still clean after fifteen minutes, and if he consults books in order to find what he needs, he is “froid”, as is his creation, for his inspiration comes from books rather than from life.

If one is to apply Diderot's ideas on the interdependence of technique and ideal to his envisioning of these two different colourists – the chaotic and the cold – it is clearly the

chaotic colourist that Diderot would favour. The chaotic colourist's technique is rooted in chaos and high emotion, but from it emerges inspiration, emerges life, emerges ideal. This is not only consistent with Diderot's own ideas, but with how the technique of colour was perceived in the eighteenth century as a whole :

Dans la conception philosophique classique de l'art, dont Kant hérite encore à la fin du dix-huitième siècle, il y a une dévalorisation de la couleur au profit du dessin. C'est que la couleur s'adresse d'abord à la sensation et non au jugement, que le plaisir lié à la couleur est une jouissance sensible avant d'être un plaisir intellectuel (...) Si le dessin est du côté de la forme, la couleur, c'est-à-dire le matériel dans l'art, est du côté de la vie. Elle est principe d'animation des œuvres (Duflo 2007 in ed. Cammagre and Talon-Hugon 2007 : 43).

In the eighteenth century, colour was considered to be inferior to form because it was seen to be the result of a Barthesian "jouissance sensible" rather than the consequence of "un plaisir intellectuel". This eighteenth-century perception of colour only serves to strengthen the link between Diderot's ideas on colour in *Essais sur la peinture* and his remarks in the *Salons* regarding the role of the pairing of technique and ideal in the creation of great art. In the *Essais sur la peinture*, Diderot claims that a colourist can only succeed in creating a work of great ideal if his technique stems from high emotion. In the *Salons*, high emotion can only invigorate a work of art in the form of superior ideal, if it is portrayed through appropriate technique. Thus, in both these works, the relationship between technique and ideal, and the symbiotic nature of that relationship, is clear.

The wealth of material inherent in this small extract of *Essais sur la peinture* is sufficient justification for the studying of *Essais sur la peinture* in terms of their portrayal of the interdependence of technique and ideal. Such a study would also be valuable in terms of the manner in which the *Salon de 1765* and the *Essais sur la peinture* act as precursors to the *Salon de 1767* ; a work in which Diderot advocates both passion and *sang-froid* as favourable qualities in an artist.

While the *Essais sur la peinture* present promising research possibilities in terms of Diderot's construction and employment of the "couple technique-idéal" (Lojkine 2009)<sup>126</sup>, these essays also afford a researcher the opportunity to examine more closely which artists may have been influenced by Diderot's ideas on this "couple" that are presented in the *Essais sur la peinture*

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<sup>126</sup> No page number provided in web document.

and the *Salons*. A potential case in point is Jacques-Louis David, whose early paintings *Saint Roch* and *Bélisaire reconnu par un soldat qui avait servi sous lui, au moment qu'une femme lui fait l'aumône* were critiqued by Diderot in his final *Salon*, in 1781<sup>127</sup>.

#### 6.4 Art criticism today

Finally, the writing of a dissertation, in 2016, on the creation of modern art criticism in eighteenth-century France, throws into sharp relief the status of art criticism today, and whether or not it still has a role to play in a society gripped by what Eco calls an “orgy of tolerance” (2010 : 428) in the domain of art. Levi Strauss and Jones, two prominent contemporary art critics, both offer relevant insight into the importance and function of art criticism in today’s world.

For Levi Strauss, art criticism is important in terms of the manner in which it bridges the gap between art and society. Without criticism, the only means available to us of determining art’s importance would be in terms of its monetary value, a bleak prospect that puts a brutal end to all dialogue and constructive engagement between art, artists and the world from which they draw inspiration:

Why does art need criticism? Because it needs something outside of itself as a place of reflection, discernment, and connection with the larger world. Art for art’s sake is fine, if you can get it. But then the connection to the real becomes tenuous, and the connection to the social disappears. If you want to engage, if you want discourse, you need criticism. (Levi Strauss 2012).

Levi Strauss highlights the role that art criticism has to play in terms of fostering debate in society, and states that without it, debate can never take place. Jones expresses a similar opinion, but in a slightly different way, arguing that the popular stereotype of the art critic as a conceited individual whose role it is to tell the general public what they should think about a particular work of art is, in fact, a compliment to those who practice the profession of art criticism:

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<sup>127</sup> Benhamou (1997) argues that David’s teaching style was influenced by Diderot’s ideas on the training of artists that are laid down in *Essais sur la peinture*, as a number of similarities between their ideas can be identified. Benhamou discusses Sainte-Beuve’s interesting claim that David asked for Diderot’s opinion of the *Bélisaire* before submitting it to the *Académie*, and that it was on this occasion that Diderot communicated his ideas on the teaching of painting (Sainte-Beuve III : 309-310). Benhamou also analyses Fried’s argument (1970 : 138) that Diderot and David were not mere acquaintances, but participants in a fervent romantic relationship similar to Diderot’s *rapport* with Grimm and Rousseau. Further, it is mentioned that Diderot’s comments on David in the *Salon de 1781* effectively predict the rise of Neo-Classicism, the genre that David would come to define. It would be a fascinating research topic to see if Diderot’s ideas on technique and ideal mentioned in the *Essais sur la peinture* impacted on David’s painting style in his pioneering of Neoclassicism.

The response of one passionate and critical writer is worth a hundred, or a thousand, uncritical surveys that, by refusing to come off the fence, never get anywhere near the life of art. Let me give an example. In his book *The Stones of Venice*, the critic Ruskin claims that Renaissance architecture is a moral disgrace, that Venetian civilisation was at its peak in the 13th century and that the age of Titian and Palladio was gripped by decline. Outrageous, in some ways ridiculous, opinions. But to this day, readers find more profound insights into the art and architecture of Venice in Ruskin than we do in countless even-handed textbooks, whether we agree with all, or some, or none, of his views (Jones 2011).

It takes very little effort to imagine that Jones' comments on Ruskin's value as an art critic were in fact written about Diderot. The philosopher, both passionate and critical, was deeply interested in what Jones calls "the life of art"<sup>128</sup>, and was willing to stray far from the proverbial fence in the name of drawing closer to and better understanding art's "life". Like Ruskin, Diderot's opinions can often be "outrageous", and would sometimes not have seemed particularly helpful to whichever artist he was berating at the time. But it is thanks to Diderot's opinions, sometimes outrageous and sometimes not, that we are able to learn about eighteenth-century French art on such a profound level. It is also important to note that in his art criticism, Diderot encourages debate and freethinking by commenting on the discussions of his fellow salon-goers<sup>129</sup>, or suggesting that the reader decide for himself whether or not to accept Diderot's opinion<sup>130</sup>. This is the very essence of the function of art criticism according to Levi Strauss and Jones: the fostering of a spirit of debate within society. It is also what we may call the life-force of the Enlightenment of which Diderot was such an important part.

## 6.5 Closing comment

This dissertation began with a discussion of a project that encouraged the spirit of debate so characteristic of the Enlightenment by making knowledge widely and readily available: the *Encyclopédie*. It seems only fitting that in closing, we refer to the *Encyclopédie* once again.

The extract below is Diderot's scathing and impassioned reply to Voltaire, who, shortly after D'Alembert's iniquitous desertion of the *Encyclopédie* in January 1758, suggests abandoning the project, or moving it to another country, or seeking reparation for the slanders against the *Encyclopédie* being perpetrated in France. We propose that when Diderot wrote these lines in

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<sup>128</sup> Let us not forget that in the *Essais sur la peinture*, Diderot refers to ideal, and the technique that brings it about, as "le souffle divin" (Assézat X : 468)

<sup>129</sup> See Diderot's critique of *La Charité Romaine* in the *Salon de 1765* (Chapter 4).

<sup>130</sup> See Diderot's critique of *Saint Denis* in the *Salon de 1767* (Chapter 5).

reply, he not only states his desire to benefit mankind with his talent, but passionately expresses his wish to preserve the spirit of debate that the distribution of the *Encyclopédie* would serve to encourage and entrench. Diderot's intentions with regard to the *Encyclopédie* reflect and resonate with Levi Strauss and Jones' concept of the role of art criticism, both then and today. We thus leave the last word to him.

Vous dites qu'on en use avec nous d'une manière odieuse, et vous avez raison. Vous croyez que j'en dois être indigné, et je le suis. Votre avis serait que nous quittassions tout à fait l'*Encyclopédie* ou que nous allassions la continuer en pays étranger, ou que nous obtinssions justice et liberté dans celui-ci. Voilà qui est à merveille ; mais le projet d'achever en pays étranger est une chimère (...) Abandonner l'ouvrage, c'est tourner le dos sur la brèche, et faire ce que désirent les coquins qui nous persécutent (...). Il ne faut pas s'attendre qu'on fasse justice des brigands auxquels on nous a abandonnés, et il ne nous convient guère de le demander (...) Est-ce à nous à nous plaindre, lorsqu'ils nous associent dans leurs injures avec des hommes que nous ne vaudrons jamais ? Que faire donc ? Ce qui convient à des gens de courage : mépriser nos ennemis, les poursuivre, et profiter, comme nous avons fait, de l'imbécilité de nos censeurs. Faut-il que (...) nous oublions ce que nous nous devons à nous-mêmes et au public ? (...) Je suis fait pour dire la vérité à mes amis, et quelquefois aux indifférents ; ce qui est plus honnête que sage. (...) D'après tout cela, vous croirez que je tiens beaucoup à l'*Encyclopédie* et vous vous tromperez. Mon cher maître, j'ai la quarantaine passée ; je suis las de tracasseries. Je crie, depuis le matin jusqu'au soir. Le repos, le repos, et il n'y a guère de jour que je ne sois tenté d'aller vivre obscur et mourir tranquille au fond de ma province. Il vient un temps où toutes les cendres sont mêlées. Alors, que m'importera d'avoir été Voltaire ou Diderot, et que ce soient vos trois syllabes ou les trois miennes qui restent ? Il faut travailler, il faut être utile, on doit compter de ses talents, etc...Être utile aux hommes ! (...) Adieu, mon cher maître, portez-vous bien et aimez-moi toujours ([19 février 1758] ; Assézat XX : 451-453).



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## APPENDICES

Each appendix comprises an image of the painting being critiqued, in its original form or surviving form, followed by an extract of the *Salon* pertaining to it. In instances where a painting does not survive, no image is provided.

## APPENDIX 1

### *SALON DE 1759*

#### **Jeaurat : *Chartreux en méditation***

Image : (Art 9000 n.d.)<sup>131</sup>



Il y a de Collin de Vermont une mauvaise *Adoration des Rois* ; de Jeaurat des *Chartreux en méditation* : c'est pis encore. Point de silence, rien de sauvage, rien qui rappelle la justice divine, nulle idée, nulle adoration profonde, nul recueillement intérieur, point de terreur, point d'extase ; cet homme ne s'est pas douté de cela. Si son génie ne lui disait rien, que n'allait-il aux Chartreux ? il aurait vu là ce qu'il n'imaginait pas. Mais croyez-vous qu'il l'eût vu ? S'il y a peu de gens qui sachent regarder un tableau, y a-t-il bien des peintres qui sachent regarder la nature ?...(Assézat X : 94).

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<sup>131</sup> No page number provided in web document.

## Bachelier : *Résurrection*

Image : none available.

Bachelier a fait une grande et mauvaise Résurrection, à la manière de peindre du comte de Caylus. Monsieur Bachelier, croyez-moi, revenez à vos tulipes ; il n'y a ni couleur, ni composition, ni expression, ni dessin dans votre tableau. Ce Christ est tout disloqué ; c'est un patient dont les membres ont été mal reboutés. De la manière dont vous avez ouvert ce tombeau, c'est vraiment un miracle qu'il en soit sorti, et, si on le faisait parler d'après son geste, il dirait aux spectateurs : "Adieu, messieurs, je suis votre serviteur, il ne fait pas bon parmi vous et je m'en vais. " Tous ces chercheurs de méthodes nouvelles n'ont point de génie (Assézat X : 99).

## La Grenée : *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils*

Image : Tapestry woven from cartoons of *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils* (Cité Internationale de la Tapisserie, Aubuson n.d.)<sup>132</sup>



Il y a d'un La Grenée une *Assomption*, *Vénus aux forges de Lemnos demandant à Vulcain des armes pour son fils*, un *Enlèvement de Céphale par l'Aurore* un *Jugement de Pâris*, un *Satyre qui s'amuse du sifflet de Pan* et quelques petits tableaux, car les précédents sont grands. Si j'avais eu à peindre la descente de Vénus dans les forges de Lemnos, on aurait vu les forges en feu sous des masses de roches, Vulcain debout devant son enclume, les mains appuyées sur son marteau, la déesse toute nue lui passant la main sous le menton ; ici le travail des Cyclopes suspendu, quelques-uns regardant leur maître que sa femme séduit, et souriant ironiquement ; d'autres, cependant, auraient fait étinceler le fer embrasé ; les étincelles

<sup>132</sup> No page number provided in web document.

dispersées sous leurs coups auraient écarté les Amours dans un coin, ces enfants turbulents auraient mis en désordre l'atelier du forgeron. Et qui aurait empêché qu'un des Cyclopes n'en eût saisi un par les ailes pour le baiser ? Le sujet était de poésie et d'imagination, et j'aurais tâché d'en montrer. Au lieu de cela, c'est une grande toile nue où quelques figures oisives et muettes se perdent. On ne regarde ni Vulcain, ni la déesse. Je ne sais s'il y a des Cyclopes. La seule figure qu'on remarque, c'est un homme placé sur le devant qui soulève une poutre ferrée par le bout...(Assézat X : 96-97).

### **Carle Van Loo : *Jason et Médée***

Image : Lojkine 2007<sup>133</sup>



Enfin nous l'avons vu ce tableau fameux de *Jason et Médée*, par Carle Van Loo. Ô mon ami, la mauvaise chose ! C'est une décoration théâtrale avec toute sa fausseté ; un faste de couleur qu'on ne peut supporter ; un Jason d'une bêtise inconcevable. L'imbécile tire son épée contre une magicienne qui s'envole dans les airs, qui est hors de sa portée, et qui laisse à ses pieds ses enfants égorgés. C'est bien cela ! Il fallait lever au ciel des bras désespérés, avoir la tête renversée en arrière ; les cheveux hérissés ! une bouche ouverte qui poussât de longs cris, des yeux égarés... Et puis, une petite Médée, courte, raide, engoncée, surchargée d'étoffes ; une Médée de coulisses ; pas une goutte de sang qui tombe de la pointe de son poignard et qui coule sur ses bras ; point de désordre, point de terreur. On regarde, on est ébloui et on reste froid. La draperie qui touche au corps a le mat et les reflets d'une cuirasse ; on dirait d'une plaque de cuivre jaune. Il y a sur le devant un très-bel enfant renversé sur les degrés arrosés de son sang ; mais il est sans effet. Ce peintre ne pense ni ne sent : un char d'une pesanteur

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<sup>133</sup> No page number provided in web document.

énorme ! Si ce tableau était un morceau de tapisserie, il faudrait accorder une pension au teinturier (Assézat X : 93-94).



## APPENDIX 2

### *SALON DE 1761*

#### *Greuze : L'Accordée du Village*

Image : Perny 2009<sup>134</sup>



Enfin je l'ai vu, ce tableau de notre ami Greuze ; mais ce n'a pas été sans peine ; il continue d'attirer la foule. C'est *Un Père qui vient de payer la dot de sa fille*. Le sujet est pathétique, et l'on se sent gagner d'une émotion douce en le regardant. La composition m'en a paru très-belle : c'est la chose comme elle a dû se passer. Il y a douze figures ; chacune est à sa place, et fait ce qu'elle doit. Comme elles s'enchaînent toutes ! comme elles vont en ondoyant et en pyramidant ! Je me moque de ces conditions ; cependant quand elles se rencontrent dans un morceau de peinture par hasard, sans que le peintre ait eu la pensée de les y introduire, sans qu'il leur ait rien sacrifié, elles me plaisent.

À droite de celui qui regarde le morceau est un tabellion assis devant une petite table, le dos tourné au spectateur. Sur la table, le contrat de mariage et d'autres papiers. Entre les jambes du tabellion, le plus jeune des enfants de la maison. Puis en continuant de suivre la composition de droite à gauche, une fille aînée debout, appuyée sur le dos du fauteuil de son père. Le père assis dans le fauteuil de la maison. Devant lui, son gendre debout, et tenant de la main gauche le sac qui contient la dot. L'accordée, debout aussi, un bras passé mollement sous celui de son fiancé ; l'autre bras saisi par la mère, qui est assise au-dessous. Entre la mère et la fiancée, une sœur cadette debout, penchée sur la fiancée, et un bras jeté autour de

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<sup>134</sup> No page number provided in web document.

ses épaules. Derrière ce groupe, un jeune enfant qui s'élève sur la pointe des pieds pour voir ce qui se passe. Au-dessous de la mère, sur le devant, une jeune fille assise qui a de petits morceaux de pain coupé dans son tablier. Tout à fait à gauche dans le fond et loin de la scène, deux servantes debout qui regardent. Sur la droite, un garde-manger bien propre, avec ce qu'on a coutume d'y renfermer, faisant partie du fond. Au milieu, une vieille arquebuse pendue à son croc ; ensuite un escalier de bois qui conduit à l'étage au-dessus. Sur le devant, à terre, dans l'espace vide que laissent les figures, proche des pieds de la mère, une poule qui conduit ses poussins auxquels la petite fille jette du pain ; une terrine pleine d'eau, et sur le bord de la terrine un poussin, le bec en l'air, pour laisser descendre dans son jabot l'eau qu'il a bue. Voilà l'ordonnance générale. Venons aux détails.

Le tabellion est vêtu de noir, culotte et bas de couleur, en manteau et en rabat, le chapeau sur la tête. Il a bien l'air un peu matois et chicanier, comme il convient à un paysan de sa profession ; c'est une belle figure. Il écoute ce que le père dit à son gendre. Le père est le seul qui parle. Le reste écoute et se tait.

L'enfant qui est entre les jambes du tabellion est excellent pour la vérité de son action et de sa couleur. Sans s'intéresser à ce qui se passe, il regarde les papiers griffonnés, et promène ses petites mains par-dessus.

On voit dans la sœur aînée, qui est appuyée debout sur le dos du fauteuil de son père, qu'elle crève de douleur et de jalousie de ce qu'on a accordé le pas sur elle à sa cadette. Elle a la tête portée sur une de ses mains, et lance sur les fiancés des regards curieux, chagrins et courroucés.

Le père est un vieillard de soixante ans, en cheveux gris, un mouchoir tortillé autour de son cou ; il a un air de bonhomie qui plaît. Les bras étendus vers son gendre, il lui parle avec une effusion de cœur qui enchante ; il semble lui dire : " Jeannette est douce et sage ; elle fera ton bonheur ; songe à faire le sien..." ou quelque autre chose sur l'importance des devoirs du mariage... Ce qu'il dit est sûrement touchant et honnête. Une de ses mains, qu'on voit en dehors, est hâlée et brune ; l'autre, qu'on voit en dedans, est blanche ; cela est dans la nature.

Le fiancé est d'une figure tout à fait agréable. Il est hâlé de visage ; mais on voit qu'il est blanc de peau ; il est un peu penché vers son beau-père ; il prête attention à son discours, il en a l'air pénétré ; il est fait au tour, et vêtu à merveille, sans sortir de son état. J'en dis autant de tous les autres personnages.

Le peintre a donné à la fiancée une figure charmante, décente et réservée ; elle est vêtue à merveille. Ce tablier de toile blanc fait on ne peut pas mieux ; il y a un peu de luxe dans sa garniture ; mais c'est un jour de fiançailles. Il faut voir comme les plis de tous les vêtements de cette figure et des autres sont vrais. Cette fille charmante n'est point droite ; mais il y a une légère et molle inflexion dans toute sa figure et dans tous ses membres qui la remplit de grâce et de vérité. Elle est jolie vraiment, et très-jolie. Une gorge faite au tour qu'on ne voit point du tout ; mais je gage qu'il n'y a rien là qui la relève, et que cela se soutient tout seul. Plus à son fiancé, et elle n'eût pas été assez décente ; plus à sa mère ou à son père, et elle eût été fausse. Elle a le bras à demi passé sous celui de son futur époux, et le bout de ses doigts tombe et appuie doucement sur sa main ; c'est la seule marque de tendresse qu'elle lui donne, et peut-être sans le savoir elle-même ; c'est une idée délicate du peintre.

La mère est une bonne paysanne qui touche à la soixantaine, mais qui a de la santé ; elle est aussi vêtue large et à merveille. D'une main elle tient le haut du bras de sa fille ; de l'autre, elle serre le bras au-dessus du poignet : elle est assise ; elle regarde sa fille de bas en haut ; elle a bien quelque peine à la quitter ; mais le parti est bon. Jean est un brave garçon, honnête et laborieux ; elle ne doute point que sa fille ne soit heureuse avec lui. La gaieté et la tendresse sont mêlées dans la physionomie de cette bonne mère.



Pour cette sœur cadette qui est debout à côté de la fiancée, qui l'embrasse et qui s'afflige sur son sein, c'est un personnage tout à fait intéressant. Elle est vraiment fâchée de se séparer de sa sœur, elle en pleure ; mais cet incident n'attriste pas la composition ; au contraire, il ajoute à ce qu'elle a de touchant. Il y a du goût, et du bon goût, à avoir imaginé cet épisode.

Les deux enfants, dont l'un, assis à côté de la mère, s'amuse à jeter du pain à la poule et à sa petite famille, et dont l'autre s'élève sur la pointe des pieds et tend le cou pour voir, sont charmants ; mais surtout le dernier.

Les deux servantes, debout, au fond de la chambre, nonchalamment penchées l'une contre l'autre, semblent dire, d'attitude et de visage : Quand est-ce que notre tour viendra ?

Et cette poule qui a mené ses poussins au milieu de la scène, et qui a cinq ou six petits, comme la mère aux pieds de laquelle elle cherche sa vie a six à sept enfants, et cette petite fille qui leur jette du pain et qui les nourrit ; il faut avouer que tout cela est d'une convenance charmante avec la scène qui se passe, et avec le lieu et les personnages. Voilà un petit trait de poésie tout à fait ingénieux.

C'est le père qui attache principalement les regards ; ensuite l'époux ou le fiancé ; ensuite l'accordée, la mère, la sœur cadette ou l'aînée, selon le caractère de celui qui regarde le tableau, ensuite le tabellion, les autres enfants, les servantes et le fond. Preuve certaine d'une bonne ordonnance.

Teniers peint des mœurs plus vraies peut-être. Il serait plus aisé de retrouver les scènes et les personnages de ce peintre ; mais il y a plus d'élégance, plus de grâce, une nature plus agréable dans Greuze. Ses paysans ne sont ni grossiers comme ceux de notre bon Flamand, ni chimériques comme ceux de Boucher. Je crois Teniers fort supérieur à Greuze pour la couleur. Je lui crois aussi beaucoup plus de fécondité : c'est d'ailleurs un grand paysagiste, un grand peintre d'arbres, de forêts, d'eaux, de montagnes, de chaumières et d'animaux.

On peut reprocher à Greuze d'avoir répété une même tête dans trois tableaux différents. La tête du *Père qui paye la dot* et celle du *Père qui lit l'Écriture sainte à ses enfants* et je crois aussi celle du *Paralytique*. Ou du moins ce sont trois frères avec un grand air de famille.

Autre défaut. Cette sœur aînée, est-ce une sœur ou une servante ? Si c'est une servante, elle a tort d'être appuyée sur le dos de la chaise de son maître, et je ne sais pourquoi elle envie si violemment le sort de sa maîtresse ; si c'est un enfant de la maison, pourquoi cet air ignoble, pourquoi ce négligé ? Contente ou mécontente, il fallait la vêtir comme elle doit l'être aux fiançailles de sa sœur. Je vois qu'on s'y trompe, que la plupart de ceux qui regardent le tableau la prennent pour une servante, et que les autres sont perplexes. Je ne sais si la tête de cette sœur aînée n'est pas aussi celle de la *Blanchisseuse*.

Une femme de beaucoup d'esprit a rappelé que ce tableau était composé de deux natures. Elle prétend que le père, le fiancé et le tabellion sont bien des paysans, des gens de campagne ; mais que la mère, la fiancée et toutes les autres figures sont de la halle de Paris. La mère est une grosse marchande de fruits ou de poissons ; la fille est une jolie bouquetière. Cette observation est au moins fine ; voyez, mon ami, si elle est juste.

Mais il vaudrait bien mieux négliger ces bagatelles, et s'extasier sur un morceau qui présente des beautés de tous côtés ; c'est certainement ce que Greuze a fait de mieux. Ce morceau lui fera honneur, et comme peintre savant dans son art, et comme homme d'esprit et de goût. Sa composition est pleine d'esprit et de délicatesse. Le choix de ses sujets marque de la sensibilité et de bonnes mœurs.

Un homme riche qui voudrait avoir un beau morceau en émail devrait faire exécuter ce tableau de Greuze par Durand, qui est habile, avec les couleurs que M. de Montamy a

découvertes. Une bonne copie en émail est presque regardée comme un original, et cette sorte de peinture est particulièrement destinée à copier (Assézat X : 151-156).

### **APPENDIX 3**

#### ***SALON DE 1763***

#### **Carle Van Loo : *Les Grâces enchaînées par l'amour***

Image : Lojkin 2003<sup>135</sup>



C'est un grand tableau de 7 pieds 6 pouces de haut sur 6 pieds 3 pouces de large. Les trois Grâces l'occupent presque tout entier. Celle qui est à droite du spectateur se voit par le dos ; celle du milieu, de face ; la troisième de profil. Un Amour élevé sur la pointe du pied, placé entre ces deux dernières et tournant le dos au spectateur, conduit de la main une guirlande qui passe sur les fesses de celle qu'on voit par le dos, et va cacher, en remontant, les parties naturelles de celle qui se présente de face.

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<sup>135</sup> No page number provided in web document.

Ah ! mon ami, quelle guirlande ! quel Amour ! quelles Grâces ! Il me semble que la jeunesse, l'innocence, la gaieté, la légèreté, la mollesse, un peu de tendre volupté, devaient former leur caractère ; c'est ainsi que le bon Homère les imagina et que la tradition poétique nous les a transmises. Celles de Van Loo sont si lourdes, mais si lourdes ! L'une est d'un noir jaunâtre ; c'est le gros embonpoint d'une servante d'hôtellerie et le teint d'une fille qui a les pâles couleurs. Les brunes piquantes comme nous en connaissons ont les chairs fermes et blanches, mais d'une blancheur sans transparence et sans éclat ; c'est là ce qui les distingue des blondes dont la peau fine, laissant quelquefois apercevoir les veines éparses en filets déliés et se teignant du fluide qui y circule, en reçoit en quelques endroits une nuance bleuâtre. Où est le temps où mes lèvres suivaient sur la gorge de celle que j'aimais ces traces légères qui partaient des côtés d'une touffe de lis et qui allaient se perdre vers un bouton de rose ? Le peintre n'a pas connu ces beautés. Celle des Grâces qui occupe le milieu de sa composition et qu'on voit de face, a les cheveux châains : ses chairs, son teint, devraient donc participer de la brune et de la blonde ; voilà les éléments de l'art. C'est une longue figure soutenue sur deux longues jambes fluettes. La blonde et la plus jeune, qui est à gauche, est vraiment informe. On sait bien que les contours sont doux dans les femmes, qu'on y discerne à peine les muscles et que toutes leurs formes s'arrondissent ; mais elles ne sont pas rondes et sans inégalité. Un œil expérimenté reconnaîtra dans la femme du plus bel embonpoint les traces des muscles du corps de l'homme ; ces parties sont seulement plus coulantes dans la femme, et leurs limites plus fondues. Au lieu de cette taille élégante et légère qui convenait à son âge, cette Grâce est tout d'une venue. Sans s'entendre beaucoup en proportions, on est choqué du peu de distance de la hanche au-dessous du bras ; mais je ne sais pourquoi je dis de la hanche, car elle n'a point de hanche. La posture de l'Amour est désagréable. Et cette guirlande, pourquoi va-t-elle chercher si bêtement les parties que la pudeur ordonne de voiler ? Pourquoi les cache-t-elle si scrupuleusement ? Avec un peu de délicatesse, le peintre eût senti qu'elle manquait son but, si je le devine. Une figure toute nue n'est point indécente. Placez un linge entre la main de la Vénus de Médicis et la partie de son corps que cette main veut me dérober, et vous aurez fait d'une Vénus pudique une Vénus lascive, à moins que ce linge ne descende jusqu'aux pieds de la figure.

Que vous dirai-je de la couleur générale de ce morceau ? On l'a voulue forte, sans doute, et on l'a faite insupportable. Le ciel est dur ; les terrasses sont d'un vert comme il n'y en a que là. L'artiste peut se vanter de posséder le secret de faire d'une couleur qui est d'elle-même si douce, que la nature qui a réservé le bleu pour les cieux en a tissu le manteau de la terre au printemps, d'en faire, dis-je, une couleur à aveugler, si elle était dans nos campagnes aussi forte que dans son tableau. Vous savez que je n'exagère point, et je défie la meilleure vue de soutenir ce coloris un demi-quart d'heure. Je vous dirai des *Grâces* de Van Loo ce que je vous disais il y a quatre ans de sa *Médée* : c'est un chef-d'œuvre de teinture, et je ne pense pas que l'éloge d'un bon teinturier serait celui d'un bon coloriste.

Avec tous ces défauts, je ne serais point étonné qu'un peintre me dît : " Le bel éloge que je ferais de toutes les beautés qui sont dans ce tableau et que vous n'y voyez pas !... " C'est qu'il y a tant de choses qui tiennent au technique et dont il est impossible de juger, sans avoir eu quelque temps le pouce passé dans la palette ! (Assézat X : 161-162).

## **APPENDIX 4**

### ***SALON DE 1765***

#### ***Bachelier : Tableaux peints avec de nouveaux pastels préparés à l'huile***

Image : none available.

On voit dans un de ces tableaux une femme, le coude appuyé sur une table où il y a des plumes, de l'encre et du papier. Elle présente une lettre fermée à une esclave debout. L'esclave a de l'humeur, de la mauvaise, s'entend, et non de l'humeur de peintre. Elle ne paraît pas disposée à obéir à la maîtresse. La maîtresse a l'air un peu maussade, et l'esclave l'est beaucoup. Monsieur Bachelier, laissez là votre secret, et allez remercier M. Chardin, qui a eut celui de si bien cacher votre tableau que personne que moi ne l'a vu.

Il me semble que quand on prend le pinceau, il faudrait avoir quelque idée forte, ingénieuse, délicate ou piquante, et se proposer quelque effet, quelque impression. Donner une lettre à porter est une action si commune qu'il faut absolument la relever par quelque circonstance particulière, ou par une exécution supérieure. Il y a bien peu d'artistes qui aient des idées ; et il n'y en a presque pas un seul qui puisse s'en passer. Oui, sans doute, il est permis à Chardin de montrer une cuisine, avec une servante penchée sur son tonneau et rinçant sa vaisselle ; mais il faut voir comme l'action de cette servante est vraie, comme son juste dessine le haut de sa figure, et comme les plis de ce cotillon dessinent tout ce qui est dessous. Il faut voir la vérité étonnante de tous les ustensiles de ménage, et la couleur et l'harmonie de toute la petite composition. Point de milieu, ou des idées intéressantes, un sujet original, ou un faire étonnant ; le mieux serait de réunir les deux, et la pensée piquante et l'exécution heureuse. Si le sublime du technique n'y était pas, l'idéal de Chardin serait misérable. Retenez bien cela, monsieur Bachelier (Assézat X : 294-295).

## Bachelier: *La Charité Romaine*

Image: Artnet n.d.<sup>136</sup>



Monsieur Bachelier, il est écrit : *Nil facies, invita Minerva*. On ne viole guère d'autres femmes; mais Minerve, point. La sévère et stricte déesse vous a dit : "Et lorsque vous assommez Abel avec une mâchoire d'âne, et lorsque vous saisissez notre Sauveur, bien malheureux de retomber entre vos mains au sortir de celles des Juifs, et en cent occasions tu ne feras rien qui vaille, on ne me viole point". Vous vous êtes assez vainement tourmenté, que ne revenez-vous à vos fleurs et à vos animaux? Voyez alors comme Minerve vous sourit ; comme les fleurs s'épanouissent sur votre toile, comme ce cheval bondit et rue ; comme ces chiens aboient, mordent et déchirent! Prenez-y garde, Minerve vous abandonnera tout à fait. Vous ne saurez pas peindre l'histoire ; et lorsque vous voudrez peindre des fleurs et des animaux, et que vous appellerez Minerve, Minerve, dépitée contre un enfant qui n'en veut faire qu'à sa tête, ne reviendra pas ; et vos fleurs seront pâles, ternes, flétries, passées ; vos animaux n'auront plus ni action ni vérité ; et ils seront aussi froids, aussi maussades que vos personnages humains. Je crains bien, même, que ma prophétie ne soit déjà à demi accomplie. Vous cherchez des effets singuliers et bizarres ; ce qui marque toujours la stérilité d'idées et le défaut de génie. Dans cette Charité romaine, vous avez voulu faire un tour de force, en éclairant votre toile par une lumière d'en haut ; quand vous y auriez réussi à tenir tous les artistes suspendus d'admiration, cela n'eût point empêché l'homme de goût, en vous mettant sur la ligne de Rembrandt, une fois, sans conséquence, d'examiner la situation de vos personnages, le dessin, le caractère, les passions, les expressions, les têtes, les chairs, la couleur, les draperies, et de vous dire, en hochant de la tête : *Nil facies*.

La Charité Romaine de Bachelier n'a que deux figures ; une femme qui est descendue au fond d'un cachot pour y nourrir, du lait de ses mamelles, un vieillard condamné à y périr

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<sup>136</sup> No page number provided in web document.

de la faim. La femme est assise ; on la voit de face : elle est penchée sur le vieillard qui est étendu à ses pieds, la tête posée sur ses genoux, et qu'elle allaite, on ne sait pas trop comment, car l'attitude n'est pas commode pour cette action. Cette scène est éclairée par un seul jour qui tombe du haut d'une voûte percée. Ce jour a placé la tête de cette femme dans la demi-teinte ou dans l'ombre. L'artiste a eu beau se tourmenter, se désespérer, sa tête est devenue ronde et noirâtre, couleur et forme qui, jointes à un nez aquilin ou droit, lui donnent la physionomie bizarre de l'enfant d'une Mexicaine qui a couché avec un Européen, et où les traits caractéristiques des deux nations sont brouillés.

Vous avez voulu que votre vieillard fût maigre, sec et décharné, moribond, et vous l'avez rendu hideux à faire peur. La touche extrêmement dure de sa tête, ces os proéminents, ce front étroit, cette barbe hérissée, lui ôtent la figure humaine ; son cou, ses bras, ses jambes ont beau réclamer, on le prend pour un monstre, pour l'hyène, pour tout ce qu'on veut, excepté pour un homme ; et cette femme qui demandait à Duclos, le secrétaire de l'Académie, quelle bête c'était là, ne voyait point mal. Pour la couleur et le dessin, si c'était l'imitation d'un grand pain d'épice, ce serait un chef-d'œuvre. Mais, dans le vrai, c'est une belle pièce de chamois jaune artistement ajustée sur un squelette ouaté par-ci par-là. Pour votre femme, le bras en est mal dessiné ; le raccourci ne s'en sent pas ; ses mains sont mesquines ; celle qui soutient la tête ne se discerne point ; et ce genou, sur lequel la tête de votre vilaine bête humaine est posée, d'où vient-il ? à qui appartient-il ? Vous ne savez pas seulement imiter le fer ; car la chaîne qui attache cet homme n'en est pas.

La seule chose que vous ayez bien faite sans le savoir, c'est de n'avoir donné à votre vieillard et à votre femme aucun pressentiment qu'on les observe. Cette frayeur dénature le sujet, en ôte l'intérêt, le pathétique, et ce n'est plus une charité. Ce n'est pas au moins qu'on ne pût très-bien ouvrir une fenêtre grillée sur le cachot, et même placer un soldat, un espion à cette fenêtre ; mais si le peintre a du génie, ce soldat ne sera aperçu ni du vieillard, ni de la femme qui l'allait. Il ne le sera que du spectateur, qui retrouvera sur son visage l'impression qu'il éprouve, l'étonnement, l'admiration et la joie ; et pour vous dire un petit mot consolant, je suis encore moins choqué de votre hideux vieillard que du vieillard titonisé de M. La Grenée, parce qu'une chose hideuse me blesse moins qu'une petite chose. Votre idée du moins était forte. Votre femme n'est point cette femme à joues larges, à visage long et sévère, à belles et grandes mamelles que je désire ; mais ce n'est pas non plus une jeune fillette qui prétende à l'élégance et à la belle gorge. Encore une fois, je vous le répète, le goût de l'extraordinaire est le caractère de la médiocrité. Quand on désespère de faire une chose belle, naturelle et simple, on en tente une bizarre. Croyez-moi, revenez au jasmin, à la jonquille, à la tubéreuse, au raisin ; et craignez de m'avoir cru trop tard.

C'est un peintre unique dans son genre que ce Rembrandt ! Laissez là le Rembrandt, qui a tout sacrifié à la magie du clair-obscur. Il a fallu posséder cette qualité au degré le plus éminent pour en obtenir le pardon du noir, de l'enfumé, de la dureté, et des autres défauts qui en ont été des suites nécessaires. Et puis, ce Rembrandt dessinait : il avait une touche ; et quelle touche ! des expressions, des caractères ! Et tout cela, l'aurez-vous ? quand l'aurez-vous ? (Assézat X : 290-293).



## Fragonard : *Le Grand Prêtre Corésus s'immole pour sauver Callirhoé*

Image : Laborie 2011<sup>137</sup>



Il m'est impossible, mon ami, de vous entretenir de ce tableau. Vous savez qu'il n'était plus au Salon, lorsque la sensation générale qu'il fit m'y appela. C'est votre affaire que d'en rendre compte. Nous en causerons ensemble. Cela sera d'autant mieux, que peut-être découvrirons-nous pourquoi, après un premier tribut d'éloges payé à l'artiste, après les premières exclamations, le public a semblé se refroidir. Toute composition dont le succès ne se soutient pas, manque d'un vrai mérite. Mais, pour remplir cet article FRAGONARD, je vais vous faire part d'une vision assez étrange, dont je fus tourmenté la nuit qui suivit un jour dont j'avais passé la matinée à voir des tableaux, et la soirée à lire quelques Dialogues de Platon.

### L'ANTRE DE PLATON

Il me sembla que j'étais renfermé dans le lieu qu'on appelle l'ancre de ce philosophe. C'était une longue caverne obscure. J'y étais assis parmi une multitude d'hommes, de femmes et d'enfants. Nous avions tous les pieds et les mains enchaînés ; et la tête si bien prise entre des éclisses de bois, qu'il nous était impossible de la tourner. Mais ce qui m'étonnait, c'est que la plupart de mes compagnons de prison buvaient, riaient, chantaient, sans paraître gênés de leurs chaînes, et que vous eussiez dit à les voir que c'était leur état

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<sup>137</sup> No page number provided in web document.

naturel et qu'ils n'en désiraient pas d'autre. Il me semblait même qu'on regardait de mauvais œil ceux qui faisaient quelque effort pour recouvrer la liberté de leurs pieds, de leurs mains et de leurs têtes ou qui voulaient en procurer l'usage aux autres ; qu'on les désignait par des noms odieux ; qu'on s'éloignait d'eux, comme s'ils eussent été infectés d'un mal contagieux ; et que, lorsqu'il arrivait quelque désastre dans la caverne, on ne manquait jamais de les en accuser. Équipés comme je viens de vous le dire, nous avions tous le dos tourné à l'entrée de cette demeure, et nous n'en pouvions regarder que le fond, qui était tapissé d'une toile immense.

Par derrière nous, il y avait des rois, des ministres, des prêtres, des docteurs, des apôtres, des prophètes, des théologiens, des politiques, des fripons, des charlatans, des artisans d'illusions, et toute la troupe des marchands d'espérances et de craintes. Chacun d'eux avait une provision de petites figures transparentes et colorées, propres à son état ; et toutes ces figures étaient si bien faites, si bien peintes, en si grand nombre et si variées, qu'il y en avait de quoi fournir à la représentation de toutes les scènes comiques, tragiques et burlesques de la vie.

Ces charlatans, comme je le vis ensuite, placés entre nous et l'entrée de la caverne, avaient par derrière eux une grande lampe suspendue, à la lumière de laquelle ils exposaient leurs petites figures, dont les ombres portées par-dessus nos têtes, et s'agrandissant en chemin, allaient s'arrêter sur la toile tendue au fond de la caverne, et y former des scènes, mais des scènes si naturelles, si vraies, que nous les prenions pour réelles ; et que tantôt nous en riions à gorge déployée, tantôt nous en pleurions à chaudes larmes, ce qui vous paraîtra d'autant moins étrange, qu'il y avait derrière la toile d'autres fripons subalternes aux gages des premiers, qui prêtaient à ces ombres les accents, les discours, les vraies voix de leurs rôles. Malgré le prestige de cet apprêt, il y en avait dans la foule quelques-uns d'entre nous qui le soupçonnaient, qui secouaient de temps en temps leurs chaînes, et qui avaient la meilleure envie de se débarrasser de leurs éclisses et de tourner la tête ; mais à l'instant, tantôt l'un, tantôt l'autre des charlatans que nous avions à dos, se mettait à crier d'une voix forte et terrible : "Garde-toi de tourner la tête!... malheur à qui secouera sa chaîne!...Respecte les éclisses !..."

Je vous dirai une autre fois ce qui arrivait à ceux qui méprisaient le conseil de la voix, les périls qu'ils couraient, les persécutions qu'ils avaient à souffrir. Ce sera pour quand nous ferons de la philosophie. Aujourd'hui qu'il s'agit de tableaux, j'aime mieux vous en décrire quelques-uns de ceux que je vis sur la grande toile. Je vous jure qu'ils valaient bien les meilleurs du Salon. Sur cette toile, tout paraissait d'abord assez décousu ; on pleurait, on riait, on jouait, on buvait, on chantait, on se mordait les poings, on s'arrachait les cheveux, on se caressait, on se fouettait ; au moment où l'un se noyait, un autre était pendu, un troisième élevé sur un piédestal. Mais à la longue, tout se liait, s'éclaircissait et s'entendait. Voici ce que je vis s'y passer à différents intervalles, que je rapprocherai pour abrégé.

D'abord ce fut un jeune homme, ses longs vêtements sacerdotaux en désordre, la main armée d'un thyrses, le front couronné de lierre, qui versait, d'un grand vase antique, des flots de vin dans de larges et profondes coupes qu'il portait à la bouche de quelques femmes, aux yeux hagards, et à la tête échevelée. Il s'enivrait avec elles ; elles s'enivraient avec lui ; et quand ils étaient ivres, ils se levaient et se mettaient à courir les rues en poussant des cris mêlés de fureur et de joie. Les peuples, frappés de ces cris, se renfermaient dans leurs maisons, et craignaient de se trouver sur leur passage. Ils pouvaient mettre en pièces le téméraire qu'ils auraient rencontré, et je vis qu'ils le faisaient quelquefois. Eh bien ! mon ami, qu'en dites-vous ?



GRIMM

Je dis que voilà deux assez beaux tableaux, à peu près du même genre.

DIDEROT

En voici un troisième d'un genre différent. Le jeune prêtre qui conduisait ces furieuses était de la plus belle figure : je le remarquai ; et il me sembla, dans le cours de mon rêve, que, plongé dans une ivresse plus dangereuse que celle du vin, il s'adressait avec le visage, le geste et les discours les plus passionnés et les plus tendres, à une jeune fille dont il embrassait vainement les genoux et qui refusait de l'entendre.

GRIMM

Celui-ci, pour n'avoir que deux figures, n'en serait pas plus facile à faire.

DIDEROT

Surtout s'il fallait leur donner l'expression forte et le caractère peu commun qu'elles avaient sur la toile de la caverne. Tandis que ce prêtre sollicitait sa jeune inflexible, voilà que j'entends tout à coup, dans le fond des habitations, des cris, des ris, des hurlements, et que j'en vois sortir des pères, des mères, des femmes, des filles, des enfants. Les pères se précipitaient sur leurs filles, qui avaient perdu tout sentiment de pudeur ; les mères, sur leurs fils, qui les méconnaissaient ; les enfants des différents sexes mêlés, confondus, se roulaient à terre ; c'était un spectacle de joie extravagante, de licence effrénée, d'une ivresse et d'une fureur inconcevables. Ah ! si j'étais peintre ! J'ai encore tous ces visages-là présents à mon esprit.

GRIMM

Je connais un peu nos artistes ; et je vous jure qu'il n'y en a pas un seul en état d'ébaucher ce tableau.

DIDEROT

Au milieu de ce tumulte, quelques vieillards, que l'épidémie avait épargnés, les yeux baignés de larmes, prosternés dans un temple, frappant la terre de leurs fronts, embrassaient, de la manière la plus suppliante, les autels du dieu : et j'entendis très distinctement le dieu, ou peut-être le fripon subalterne qui était derrière la toile, dire : "Qu'elle meure, ou qu'un autre meure pour elle!"

GRIMM

Mais, mon ami, du train dont vous rêvez, savez-vous qu'un seul de vos rêves suffirait pour une galerie entière?

DIDEROT

Attendez, attendez, vous n'y êtes pas. J'étais dans une extrême impatience de connaître quelle serait la suite de cet oracle funeste, lorsque le temple s'ouvrit derechef à mes yeux.

Le pavé en était couvert d'un grand tapis rouge, bordé d'une large frange d'or. Ce riche tapis et la frange retombaient au-dessous d'une longue marche, qui régnait tout le long de la façade. À droite, près de cette marche, il y avait un de ces grands vaisseaux de sacrifice destinés à recevoir le sang des victimes. De chaque côté de la partie du temple que je découvrais, deux grandes colonnes d'un marbre blanc et transparent semblaient en aller chercher la voûte. À droite, au pied de la colonne la plus avancée, on avait placé une urne de marbre noir, couverte en partie des linges propres aux cérémonies sanglantes.

De l'autre côté de la même colonne, c'était un candélabre de la forme la plus noble ; il était si haut, que peu s'en fallait qu'il n'atteignît le chapiteau de la colonne. Dans l'intervalle des deux colonnes de l'autre côté, il y avait un grand autel ou trépied triangulaire, sur lequel le feu sacré était allumé. Je voyais la lueur rougeâtre des brasiers ardents ; et la fumée des parfums me dérobait une partie de la colonne intérieure. Voilà le théâtre d'une des plus terribles et des plus touchantes représentations qui se soient exécutées sur la toile de la caverne pendant ma vision.

GRIMM

Mais, dites-moi, mon ami, n'avez-vous confié votre rêve à personne ?

DIDEROT

Non. Pourquoi me faites-vous cette question ?

GRIMM

C'est que le temple que vous venez de décrire est exactement le lieu de la scène du tableau de Fragonard.

DIDEROT

Cela se peut. J'avais tant entendu parler de ce tableau, les jours précédents, qu'ayant à faire un temple en rêve, j'aurai fait le sien. Quoi qu'il en soit, tandis que mes yeux parcouraient ce temple, et remarquaient des apprêts qui me présageaient je ne sais quoi dont mon cœur était oppressé, je vis arriver seul un jeune acolyte vêtu de blanc. Il avait l'air triste ; il alla s'accroupir au pied du candélabre, et s'appuyer les bras sur la saillie de la base de la colonne intérieure. Il fut suivi d'un prêtre. Ce prêtre avait les bras croisés sur la poitrine, la tête tout à fait penchée. Il paraissait absorbé dans la douleur et la réflexion la plus profonde ; il s'avancait à pas lents. J'attendais qu'il relevât sa tête ; il le fit en tournant les yeux vers le ciel, et poussant l'exclamation la plus douloureuse, que j'accompagnai moi-même d'un cri, quand je reconnus ce prêtre. C'était le même que j'avais vu quelques instants auparavant presser avec tant d'instance et si peu de succès la jeune inflexible ; il était aussi vêtu de blanc, toujours beau ; mais la douleur avait fait une impression profonde sur son visage ; il avait le front couronné de lierre, et il tenait dans sa main droite le couteau sacré ; il alla se placer debout, à quelque distance du jeune acolyte qui l'avait précédé. Il vint un second acolyte, vêtu de blanc, qui s'arrêta derrière lui. Je vis entrer ensuite une jeune fille ; elle était pareillement vêtue de blanc. Une couronne de roses lui ceignait la tête. La pâleur de la mort couvrait son visage. Ses genoux tremblants se dérobaient sous elle. A peine eut-elle la force d'arriver jusqu'aux pieds de celui dont elle était adorée ; car c'était celle qui avait si fièrement dédaigné sa tendresse et ses vœux.

Quoique tout se passât en silence, il n'y avait qu'à les regarder l'un et l'autre, et se rappeler les mots de l'oracle, pour comprendre que c'était la victime, et qu'il allait en être le sacrificateur.

Lorsqu'elle fut proche du grand prêtre, son malheureux amant, ah ! cent fois plus malheureux qu'elle, la force l'abandonna tout à fait ; et elle tomba renversée sur le lit ou le lieu même où elle devait recevoir le coup mortel. Elle avait le visage tourné vers le ciel. Ses yeux étaient fermés. Ses deux bras, que la vie semblait avoir déjà quittés, pendaient à ses côtés ; le derrière de sa tête touchait presque aux vêtements du grand prêtre, son sacrificateur et son amant. Le reste de son corps était étendu. Seulement l'acolyte, qui s'était arrêté derrière le grand prêtre, le tenait un peu relevé. Tandis que la malheureuse destinée des hommes et la cruauté des dieux ou de leurs ministres, car les dieux ne sont rien, m'occupaient, et que j'essayais quelques larmes qui s'étaient échappées de mes yeux, il était entré un troisième acolyte, vêtu de blanc comme les autres, et le front couronné de roses. Que ce jeune acolyte était beau ! Je ne sais si c'était sa modestie, sa jeunesse, sa douceur, sa noblesse, qui m'intéressaient ; mais il me parut l'emporter sur le grand prêtre même. Il s'était accroupi à quelque distance de la victime évanouie ; et ses yeux attendris étaient attachés sur elle. Un quatrième acolyte, en habit blanc aussi, vint se ranger près de celui qui soutenait la victime ; il mit un genou en terre, et il posa sur son autre genou un grand bassin qu'il prit par les bords, comme pour le présenter au sang qui allait couler. Ce bassin, la place de cet acolyte, et son action ne désignaient que, trop cette fonction cruelle. Cependant il était accouru dans le temple beaucoup d'autres personnes. Les hommes, nés compatissants, cherchent, dans les spectacles cruels, l'exercice de cette qualité. Je distinguai vers le fond, proche de la colonne intérieure du côté gauche, deux prêtres âgés, debout, et remarquables tant par le vêtement irrégulier dont leur tête était enveloppée, que par la sévérité de leur caractère et la gravité de leur maintien. Il y avait, presque en dehors, contre la colonne antérieure du même côté, une femme seule ; un peu plus loin, et plus en dehors, une autre femme, le dos appuyé contre une borne, avec un jeune enfant nu sur ses genoux. La beauté de cet enfant, et plus peut-être encore l'effet singulier de la lumière qui les éclairait, sa mère et lui, les ont fixés dans ma mémoire. Au-delà de ces femmes, mais dans l'intérieur du temple, deux autres spectateurs. Au-devant de ces spectateurs, précisément entre les deux colonnes, vis-à-vis de l'autel et de son brasier ardent, un vieillard dont le caractère et les cheveux gris me frappèrent. Je me doute bien que l'espace plus reculé était rempli de monde ; mais de l'endroit que j'occupais dans mon rêve et dans la caverne, je ne pouvais rien voir de plus.

## GRIMM

C'est qu'il n'y avait rien de plus à voir ; que ce sont là tous les personnages du tableau de Fragonard ; et qu'ils se sont trouvés, dans votre rêve, placés tout juste comme sur sa toile.

## DIDEROT

Si cela est, oh ! le beau tableau que Fragonard a fait ! Mais écoutez le reste.

Le ciel brillait de la clarté la plus pure. Le soleil semblait précipiter toute la masse de sa lumière dans le temple, et se plaire à la rassembler sur la victime, lorsque les voûtes s'obscurcirent de ténèbres épaisses qui, s'étendant sur nos têtes, et se mêlant à l'air, à la lumière, produisirent une horreur soudaine. À travers ces ténèbres, je vis planer un génie infernal ; je le vis. Des yeux hagards lui sortaient de la tête. Il tenait un poignard d'une main ; de l'autre il secouait une torche ardente. Il criait. C'était le Désespoir ; et l'Amour, le redoutable Amour, était porté sur son dos. À l'instant, le grand prêtre tire le couteau sacré ; il

lève le bras ; je crois qu'il en va frapper la victime ; qu'il va l'enfoncer dans le sein de celle qui l'a dédaigné, et que le ciel lui a livrée. Point du tout ; il s'en frappe lui-même.

Un cri général perce et déchire l'air : je vois la mort et ses symptômes errer sur les joues, sur le front du tendre et généreux infortuné ; ses genoux défaillent, sa tête retombe en arrière, un de ses bras est pendant, la main dont il a saisi le couteau le tient encore enfoncé dans son cœur. Tous les regards s'attachent ou craignent de s'attacher sur lui ; tout marque la peine et l'effroi. L'acolyte qui est au pied du candélabre a la touche entrouverte, et regarde avec effroi. Celui qui soutient la victime retourne la tête, et regarde avec effroi ; celui qui tient le bassin funeste relève ses yeux effrayés. Le visage et les bras tendus de celui qui me parut si beau montrent toute sa douleur et tout son effroi. Ces deux prêtres âgés, dont les regards cruels ont dû se repaître si souvent de la vapeur du sang dont ils ont arrosé les autels, n'ont pu se refuser à la douleur, à la commisération, à l'effroi ; ils plaignent le malheureux, ils souffrent, ils sont consternés. Cette femme seule, appuyée contre une des colonnes, saisie d'horreur et d'effroi, s'est retournée subitement ; et cette autre, qui avait le dos contre une borne, s'est renversée en arrière, une de ses mains s'est portée sur ses yeux, et son autre bras semble repousser d'elle ce spectacle effrayant. La surprise et l'effroi sont peints sur les visages des spectateurs éloignés d'elle. Mais rien n'égale la consternation et la douleur du vieillard aux cheveux gris. Ses cheveux se sont dressés sur son front ; je crois le voir encore, la lumière du brasier ardent l'éclairant, et ses bras étendus au-dessus de l'autel. Je vois ses yeux, je vois sa bouche, je le vois s'élancer ; j'entends ses cris ; ils me réveillent ; la toile se replie, et la caverne disparaît.

GRIMM

Voilà le tableau de Fragonard ; le voilà avec tout son effet

DIDEROT

En vérité?

GRIMM

C'est le même temple, la même ordonnance, les mêmes personnages, la même action, les mêmes caractères, le même intérêt général, les mêmes qualités, les mêmes défauts. Dans la caverne, vous n'avez vu que les simulacres des êtres ; et Fragonard, sur sa toile, ne vous en aurait montré non plus que les simulacres. C'est un beau rêve que vous avez fait ; c'est un beau rêve qu'il a peint. Quand on perd son tableau de vue pour un moment, on craint toujours que sa toile ne se replie comme la vôtre, et que ces fantômes intéressants et sublimes ne s'évanouissent comme ceux de la nuit. Si vous aviez vu son tableau vous auriez été frappé de la même magie de lumière, et de la manière dont les ténèbres se fondaient avec elle ; du lugubre que ce mélange portait dans tous les points de sa composition ; vous auriez éprouvé la même commisération, le même effroi ; vous auriez vu la masse de cette lumière, forte d'abord, se dégrader avec une vitesse et un art surprenants ; vous en auriez remarqué les échos se jouant supérieurement entre les figures. Ce vieillard, dont les cris perçants vont ont réveillé, il y était, au même endroit, et tel que vous l'avez vu ; et les deux femmes, et le jeune enfant, tous, vêtus, éclairés, effrayés, comme vous l'avez dit. Ce sont les mêmes prêtres âgés avec leur draperie de tête, large, grande et pittoresque ; les mêmes acolytes avec leurs habits blancs et sacerdotaux, répandus précisément sur sa toile comme sur la vôtre. Celui que vous avez trouvé si beau, il était beau dans le tableau comme dans votre rêve, recevant la lumière par le dos, ayant par conséquent toutes ses parties antérieures dans la demi-teinte ou l'ombre ;

effet de peinture plus facile à rêver qu'à produire, et qui ne lui avait ôté ni sa noblesse, ni son expression.

DIDEROT

Ce que vous me dites me ferait presque croire que moi, qui n'y crois pas pendant le jour, je suis en commerce avec lui pendant la nuit. Mais l'instant effroyable de mon rêve, celui où le sacrificateur s'enfonce le poignard dans le sein, est donc celui que Fragonard a choisi?

GRIMM

Assurément. Nous avons seulement observé, dans le tableau, que les vêtements du grand prêtre tenaient un peu trop de ceux d'une femme.

DIDEROT

Attendez... Mais c'est comme dans mon rêve.

GRIMM

Que ces jeunes acolytes, tout nobles, tout charmants qu'ils étaient, étaient d'un sexe indécis, des espèces d'hermaphrodites.

DIDEROT

C'est encore comme dans mon rêve.

GRIMM

Que la victime, bien couchée, bien tombée, était peut-être un peu trop étroitement serrée d'en bas par ses vêtements.

DIDEROT

Je l'ai aussi remarqué dans mon rêve ; mais je lui faisais un mérite d'être décente, même dans ce moment.

GRIMM

Que sa tête, faible de couleur, peu expressive, sans teintes, sans passages, était plutôt celle d'une femme qui sommeille que d'une femme qui s'évanouit.

DIDEROT

Je l'ai rêvée avec ces défauts.

GRIMM

Pour la femme, qui tenait l'enfant sur ses genoux, nous l'avons trouvée supérieurement peinte et ajustée ; et le rayon de lumière échappé qui l'éclairait, à faire illusion ; le reflet de la lumière sur la colonne antérieure, de la dernière vérité ; le candélabre, de la plus belle forme,

et faisant bien l'or. Il a fallu des figures aussi vigoureusement coloriées que celles de Fragonard, pour se soutenir au-dessus de ce tapis rouge, bordé d'une frange d'or. Les têtes des vieillards nous ont paru faites d'humeur, et marquant bien la surprise et l'effroi ; les génies, bien furieux, bien aériens ; et la vapeur noire qu'ils amenaient avec eux, bien éparse, et ajoutant un terrible étonnant à la scène ; les masses d'ombre relevant de la manière la plus forte et la plus piquante la splendeur éblouissante des éclairs. Et puis un intérêt unique. De quelque côté qu'on portât les yeux, on rencontrait l'effroi ; il était dans tous les personnages ; il s'élançait du grand prêtre ; il se répandait, il s'accroissait par les deux génies, par la vapeur obscure qui les accompagnait, par la sombre lueur des brasiers. Il était impossible de refuser son âme à une impression si répétée. C'était comme dans les émeutes populaires, où la passion du grand nombre nous saisit avant même que le motif en soit connu. Mais, outre la crainte qu'au premier signe de croix tous ces beaux simulacres ne disparussent, il y a des juges d'un goût sévère, qui ont cru sentir dans toute la composition je ne sais quoi de théâtral qui leur a déplu. Quoi qu'ils en disent, croyez que vous avez fait un beau rêve, et Fragonard un beau tableau. Il a toute la magie, toute l'intelligence et toute la machine pittoresque. La partie idéale est sublime dans cet artiste, à qui il ne manque qu'une couleur plus vraie et une perfection technique, que le temps et l'expérience peuvent lui donner (Assézat X : 396-409).

## APPENDIX 5

### *SALON DE 1767*

#### *Vien : Saint Denis prêchant la foi en France*

Image : Muzéo. n.d.<sup>138</sup>



Le public a été partagé entre ce tableau de Vien, et celui de Doyen sur l'épidémie des ardents ; et il est certain que ce sont deux beaux tableaux ; deux grandes machines. Je vais décrire le premier. On trouvera la description de l'autre à son rang.

À droite, c'est une fabrique d'architecture, la façade d'un temple ancien, avec sa plate-forme au-devant. Au-dessus de quelques marches qui conduisent à cette plate-forme, vers l'entrée du temple, on voit l'apôtre des gaules prêchant. Debout derrière lui, quelques-uns de ses disciples ou prosélytes ; à ses pieds, en tournant de la droite de l'apôtre, vers la gauche du tableau, un peu sur le fond, agenouillées, assises, accroupies, quatre femmes dont l'une pleure, la seconde écoute. La troisième médite, la quatrième regarde avec joie. Celle-ci retient devant elle son enfant qu'elle embrasse du bras droit. Derrière ces femmes, debout,

<sup>138</sup> No page number provided in web document.

tout à fait sur le fond, trois vieillards dont deux conversent et semblent n'être pas d'accord. Continuant de tourner dans le même sens une foule d'auditeurs hommes, femmes, enfants, assis, debout, prosternés, accroupis, agenouillés, faisant passer la même expression par toutes ses différentes nuances, depuis l'incertitude qui hésite, jusqu'à la persuasion qui admire ; depuis l'attention qui pèse, jusqu'à l'étonnement qui se trouble ; depuis la componction qui s'attendrit, jusqu'au repentir qui s'afflige.

Pour vous faire une idée de cette foule qui occupe le côté gauche du tableau, imaginez vue par le dos, accroupie sur les dernières marches, une femme en admiration les deux bras tendus vers le saint. Derrière elle, sur une marche plus basse et un peu plus sur le fond, un homme agenouillé, écoutant, incliné et acquiesçant de la tête, des bras, des épaules et du dos. Tout à fait à gauche, deux grandes femmes debout. Celle qui est sur le devant est attentive ; l'autre est groupée avec elle par son bras droit posé sur l'épaule gauche de la première ; elle regarde ; elle montre du doigt un de ses frères, apparemment, parmi ce groupe de disciples ou de prosélytes placés debout derrière le saint. Sur un plan entr'elles et les deux figures qui occupent le devant et qu'on voit par le dos, la tête et les épaules d'un vieillard étonné, prosterné, admirant. Le reste du corps de ce personnage est dérobé par un enfant vu par le dos et appartenant à l'une des deux grandes femmes qui sont debout. Derrière ces femmes, le reste des auditeurs dont on n'aperçoit que les têtes. Au centre du tableau, sur le fond, dans le lointain, une fabrique de pierre, fort élevée, avec différents personnages, hommes et femmes, appuyés sur le parapet et regardant ce qui se passe sur le devant. Au haut, vers le ciel, sur des nuages, la religion assise, un voile ramené sur son visage, tenant un calice à la main. Audessous d'elle, les ailes déployées, un grand ange qui descend avec une couronne qu'il se propose de placer sur la tête de Denis.

Voici donc le chemin de cette composition, la religion, l'ange, le saint, les femmes qui sont à ses pieds, les auditeurs qui sont sur le fond, ceux qui sont à gauche aussi sur le fond, les deux grandes figures de femmes qui sont debout, le vieillard incliné à leurs pieds, et les deux figures, l'une d'homme et l'autre de femme vues par le dos et placées tout à fait sur le devant, ce chemin descendant mollement et serpentant largement depuis la religion jusqu'au fond de la composition à gauche où il se replie pour former circulairement et à distance, autour du saint une espèce d'enceinte qui s'interrompt à la femme placée sur le devant, les bras dirigés vers le saint, et découvre toute l'étendue intérieure de la scène, ligne de liaison allant clairement, nettement, facilement chercher les objets principaux de la composition dont elle ne néglige que les fabriques de la droite et du fond, et les vieillards indiscrets interrompant le saint, conversant entre eux et disputant à l'écart.

Reprenons cette composition. L'apôtre est bien posé. Il a le bras droit étendu, la tête un peu portée en avant. Il parle. Cette tête est ferme, tranquille, simple, noble, douce, d'un caractère un peu rustique et vraiment apostolique. Voilà pour l'expression. Quant au faire, elle est bien peinte, bien empâtée. La barbe large et touchée d'humeur. La draperie ou grande aube blanche, qui tombe en plis parallèles et droits, est très belle. Si elle montre moins le nu qu'on ne désirerait, c'est qu'il y a vêtement sur vêtement. La figure entière ramasse sur elle toute la force, tout l'éclat de la lumière, et appelle la première attention. Le ton général est peut-être un peu gris, et trop égal.

Le jeune homme qui est derrière le saint, sur le devant, est bien dessiné, bien peint. C'est une figure de Raphaël pour la pureté qui est merveilleuse, pour la noblesse et pour le caractère de tête qui est divin. Il est très fortement colorié. On prétend que sa draperie est un peu lourde. Cela se peut. Les autres acolytes se soutiennent très bien à côté de lui et pour la forme et pour la couleur.

Les femmes accroupies aux pieds du saint sont livides et découpées. L'enfant qu'une d'elles retient en l'embrassant est de cire.



Ces deux personnages qui conversent sur le fond sont d'une couleur sale, mesquins de caractère, pauvres de draperie ; du reste, assez bien ensemble.

Les femmes de la gauche, qui sont debout et qui font masse, ont quelque chose de gêné dans leur tête. Leur vêtement voltige à merveille sur le nu qu'il effleure.

La femme assise sur les marches, avec ses bras tendus vers le saint, est fortement colorée ; la touche en est belle, et sa vigueur renvoie le saint à une grande distance.

La figure d'homme agenouillé derrière cette femme n'est ni moins belle, ni moins vigoureuse, ce qui l'amène bien en avant.

On dit que ces deux dernières figures sont trop petites pour le saint, et surtout pour celles qui sont debout à côté d'elles ; cela se peut.

On dit que la femme aux bras tendus a le bras droit trop court, qu'elle blute et qu'on n'en sent pas le raccourci. Cela se peut encore.

Quant au fond, il est parfaitement d'accord avec le reste, ce qui n'est ni commun ni facile.

Cette composition est vraiment le contraste de celle de Doyen. Toutes les qualités qui manquent à l'un de ces artistes, l'autre les a. Il règne ici la plus belle harmonie de couleur, une paix, un silence qui charment. C'est toute la magie secrète de l'art, sans apprêt, sans recherche, sans effort. C'est un éloge qu'on ne peut refuser à Vien ; mais quand on tourne les yeux sur Doyen qu'on voit sombre, vigoureux, bouillant et chaud, il faut s'avouer que dans la prédication de saint Denis tout ne se fait valoir que par une faiblesse supérieurement entendue ; faiblesse que la force de Doyen fait sortir ; mais faiblesse harmonieuse qui fait sortir à son tour toute la discordance de son antagoniste. Ce sont deux grands athlètes qui font un coup fourré. Les deux compositions sont l'une à l'autre comme les caractères des deux hommes. Vien est large, sage comme le Dominiquin. De belles têtes, un dessin correct, de beaux pieds, de belles mains, des draperies bien jetées, des expressions simples et naturelles ; rien de tourmenté, rien de recherché soit dans les détails soit dans l'ordonnance. C'est le plus beau repos. Plus on le regarde, plus on se plaît à le regarder. Il tient tout à la fois du Dominiquin et de Le Sueur. Le groupe de femmes qui est à gauche est très beau. Tous les caractères de têtes paraissent avoir été étudiés d'après le premier de ces maîtres, et le groupe des jeunes hommes qui est à droite et de bonne couleur, est dans le goût de Le Sueur. Vien vous enchaîne et vous laisse tout le temps de l'examiner. Doyen d'un effet plus piquant pour l'œil semble lui dire de se dépêcher, de peur que l'impression d'un objet venant à détruire l'impression d'un autre, avant que d'avoir embrassé le tout, le charme ne s'évanouisse. Vien a toutes les parties qui caractérisent un grand faiseur. Rien n'y est négligé. Un beau fond. C'est pour les jeunes gens une source de bonnes études. Si j'étais professeur, je leur dirais, *allez à Saint-Roch, regardez la prédication de Denis. Laissez-vous en pénétrer ; mais passez vite devant le tableau des ardents ; c'est un su jet sublime de tête que vous n'êtes pas encore en état d'imiter.* Vien n'a rien fait de mieux, si ce n'est peut-être son morceau d'agrément. Vien, comme Térence,

*Liquidus, paroque simillimus amni,*

Doyen, comme Lucilius,

*Cum flueret lutulentus, erat quod tollere velles.*

C'est, si vous l'aimez mieux, Lucrèce et Virgile. Du reste, remarquez pourtant, malgré le prestige de cette harmonie de Vien, qu'il est gris ; qu'il n'y a nulle variété dans ses carnations, et que les chairs de ses hommes et de ses femmes sont presque du même ton. Remarquez, à travers la plus grande intelligence de l'art, qu'il est sans idéal, sans verve, sans poésie, sans mouvement, sans incident, sans intérêt. Ceci n'est point une assemblée

populaire ; c'est une famille, une même famille. Ce n'est point une nation à laquelle on apporte une religion nouvelle ; c'est une nation toute convertie. Quoi donc, est-ce qu'il n'y avait dans cette contrée ni magistrats, ni prêtres, ni citoyens instruits ? Que vois-je des femmes et des enfants ? Et quoi encore des femmes et des enfants. C'est comme à Saint-Roch un jour de dimanche. De graves magistrats s'ils y avoient été auraient écouté et pesé ce que la doctrine nouvelle avait de conforme ou de contraire à la tranquillité publique. Je les vois debout, attentifs, les sourcils laissés, leur tête et leur menton appuyés sur leurs mains. Des prêtres, dont les dieux auraient été menacés, s'il y en avait eu, je les aurais vus furieux et se mordant les lèvres de rage. Des citoyens instruits, tels que vous et moi, s'il y en avait eu, auraient hoché la tête de dédain et se seraient dit d'un côté de la scène à l'autre, autres platitudes qui ne valent pas mieux que les nôtres. Mais croyez-vous qu'avec du génie il n'eût pas été possible d'introduire dans cette scène le plus grand mouvement, les incidents les plus violents et les plus variés ? - *Dans une prédication ?* - Dans une prédication. - *Sans choquer la vraisemblance ?* - Sans la choquer. Changez seulement l'instant et prenez le discours de Denis à sa péroraison, lorsqu'il a embrasé toute la populace de son fanatisme, lorsqu'il lui a inspiré le plus grand mépris pour ses dieux. Vous verrez le saint ardent, enflammé, transporté de zèle, encourageant ses auditeurs à briser leurs dieux et à renverser leurs autels. Vous verrez ceux-ci suivre le torrent de son éloquence et de leur persuasion mettre la corde au col à leurs divinités, et les tirer de dessus leurs pieds d'estaux. Vous en verrez les débris. Au milieu de ces débris, vous verrez les prêtres furieux menacer, crier, attaquer, se défendre, repousser. Vous verrez les magistrats s'interposant inutilement, leurs personnes insultées et leur autorité méprisée. Vous verrez toutes les fureurs de la superstition nouvelle se mêler à celles de la superstition ancienne. Vous verrez des femmes retenir leurs maris qui s'élanceront sur l'apôtre pour l'égorger. Vous verrez des satellites conduire en prison quelques néophytes tout fier de souffrir. Vous verrez d'autres femmes embrasser les pieds du saint, l'entourer et lui faire un rempart de leurs corps ; car dans ces circonstances les femmes ont bien une autre violence que les hommes. Saint Jérôme disait aux sectaires de son tems, adressez-vous aux femmes, si vous voulez que votre doctrine prospère.

Voilà la scène que j'aurais décrite, si j'avais été poète, et celle que j'aurais peinte, si j'avais été artiste.

Vien dessine bien, peint bien ; mais il ne pense ni ne sent. Doyen serait son écolier dans l'art, mais il serait l'écolier de Doyen en poésie. Avec de la patience et du temps, le peintre des ardents peut acquérir ce qui lui manque, l'intelligence de la perspective, la distinction des plans, les vrais effets de l'ombre et de la lumière. Car il y a cent peintres décorateurs, pour un peintre de sentiment. Mais on n'apprend jamais ce que le peintre de Denis ignore. Pauvre d'idées, il restera pauvre d'idées. Sans imagination, il n'en aura jamais. Sans chaleur d'âme, toute sa vie il sera froid.

*Nil salit Arcadico juveni.*

Rien ne bat là au jeune arcadien. Mais justifions notre épigraphe, en rendant toute justice à quelques autres parties de sa composition.

L'ange qui s'élance des pieds de la religion pour aller couronner le saint, on ne saurait plus beau. Il est d'une légèreté, d'une grâce, d'une élégance incroyables ; il a les ailes déployées, il vole. Il ne pèse pas une once ; quoiqu'il ne soit soutenu d'aucun nuage, je ne crains pas qu'il tombe. Il est bien étendu. Je vois devant et derrière lui un grand espace. Il traverse le vague. Je le mesure du bout de son pied, jusqu'à l'extrémité de la main dont il tient la couronne. Mon œil tourne tout autour de lui. Il donne une grande profondeur à la scène. Il m'y fait discerner trois plans principaux très marqués, le plan de la religion qu'il renvoie à une grande distance sur le fond, celui qu'il occupe, et celui de la prédication qu'il

pousse en avant. D'ailleurs sa tête est belle. Il est bien drapé. Ses membres sont bien cadencés et il est merveilleux d'action et de mouvement. La religion est moins peinte que lui ; il est moins peint que les figures inférieures ; et cette dégradation est si juste qu'on n'en est pas frappé.

Cependant la religion n'est pas encore assez aérienne. La couleur en est un peu compacte. Du reste, bien dessinée, mieux encore ajustée ; rien d'équivoque dans les draperies ; elles sont parfaitement raisonnées. On voit d'où elles partent et où elles vont.

Le saint est très grand, et il le paraîtrait bien davantage, s'il avait la tête moins forte. En général les grosses têtes raccourcissent les figures. Ajoutez que vêtu d'une aube lâche qui ne touche point à son corps ; les plis tombant longs et droits augmentent son volume.

Depuis la clôture du Salon, les tableaux de Doyen et de Vien sont à leur place dans l'église de Saint-Roch. Celui de Vien a le plus bel effet. Celui de Doyen paraît un peu noir ; et je vois un échafaud dressé vis-à-vis qui m'annonce qu'il le retouche.

Mon ami, lorsque vous aurez des tableaux à juger, allez les voir à la chute du jour. C'est un instant très critique. S'il y a des trous, l'affaiblissement de la lumière les fera sentir. S'il y a du papillotage, il en deviendra d'autant plus fort. Si l'harmonie est entière, elle restera.

On accuse avec moi toute la composition de Vien d'être froide, et elle l'est. Mais ceux qui font ce reproche à l'artiste en ignorent certainement la raison. Je leur déclare que sans rien changer à sa prédication, mais rien du tout qu'une seule et unique chose qui n'est ni de l'ordonnance, ni des incidents, ni de la position et du caractère des figures, ni de la couleur, ni des ombres et de la lumière, bientôt je les mettrais dans le cas d'y demander encore plus de repos et de tranquillité. J'en appelle sur ce qui suit à ceux qui sont profonds dans la pratique et dans la partie spéculative de l'art.

Je prétends qu'il faut d'autant moins de mouvement dans une composition, tout étant égal d'ailleurs, que les personnages sont plus graves, plus grands, d'un module plus exagéré, d'une proportion plus forte ou prise plus au-delà de la nature commune. Cette loi s'observe au moral et au physique, c'est la loi des masses au physique c'est la loi des caractères au moral. Plus les masses sont considérables, plus elles ont d'inertie. Dans les scènes les plus effrayantes, si les spectateurs sont des personnages vénérables ; si je vois sur leurs fronts ridés et sur leurs têtes chauves, l'annonce de l'âge et de l'expérience ; si les femmes sont composées, grandes de forme, et de caractère de visage ; si ce sont des natures patagones, je serais fort étonné d'y voir beaucoup de mouvement. Les expressions, quelles qu'elles soient, les passions et le mouvement diminuent en raison de ce que les natures sont plus exagérées. Et voilà pourquoi on accuse Raphaël d'être froid, lorsqu'il est vraiment sublime ; lorsqu'en homme de génie, il proportionne les expressions, le mouvement, les passions, à la nature qu'il a imaginée et choisie. Conservez aux figures de son tableau du démoniaque les caractères qu'il leur a donnés ; introduisez-y plus de mouvement, et jugez si vous ne le gênez pas. Pareillement, introduisez dans le tableau de Vien, sans y rien changer du reste, la nature, le module de Raphaël, et dites-moi si vous n'y trouvez pas trop de mouvement. Je prescrirais donc le principe suivant à l'artiste. Si vous prenez des natures énormes, votre scène sera presque immobile. Si vous prenez des natures trop petites, votre scène sera tumultueuse et troublée ; mais il y a un milieu entre le froid et l'extravagant ; et ce point est celui où relativement à l'action représentée, le choix des natures se combine, avec le plus grand avantage possible, avec la quantité du mouvement.

Quelle que soit la nature qu'on préfère, le mouvement s'accroît en raison inverse de l'âge, depuis l'enfant jusqu'au vieillard.

Quel que soit le module ou la proportion des figures, le mouvement suit la même raison inverse.

Voilà les éléments de la composition. C'est l'ignorance de ces éléments qui a donné lieu à la diversité des jugements qu'on porte sur Raphaël. Ceux qui l'accusent d'être froids demandent de sa grande nature, ce qui ne convient qu'à une petite nature telle que la leur. Ils ne sont pas du pays. Ce sont des athéniens à Lacédémone.

Les Spartiates n'étaient pas vraisemblablement d'une autre stature que le reste des grecs. Cependant il n'est personne qui sur leur caractère tranquille, ferme, immobile, grave, froid et composé, ne les imagine beaucoup plus grands. La tranquillité, la fermeté, l'immobilité, le repos, conduisent donc l'imagination à la grandeur de stature. La grandeur de stature doit donc aussi la ramener à la tranquillité, à l'immobilité, au repos.

Les expressions, les passions, les actions et par conséquent les mouvements sont en raison inverse de l'expérience, et en raison directe de la faiblesse. Donc une scène où toutes les figures seront aréopagitiques ne saurait être troublée jusqu'à un certain point. Or telles sont la plupart des figures de Raphaël. Telles sont aussi les figures du statuaire. Le module du statuaire est communément grand ; la nature du choix de cet art est exagérée. Aussi sa composition comporte-t-elle moins de mouvement : la mobilité convient à l'atome, et le repos au monde. L'assemblée des dieux ne sera pas tumultueuse comme celle des hommes, ni celle des hommes faits, comme celle des enfants.

Un grave personnage sémillant est ridicule ; un petit personnage grave ne l'est pas moins.

On voit parmi les ruines antiques, au-dessus des colonnes d'un temple, une suite des travaux d'Hercule représentés en bas-reliefs. L'exécution du ciseau et le dessein en sont d'une pureté merveilleuses ; mais les figures sont sans mouvement, sans action, sans expression. L'Hercule de ces bas-reliefs n'est point un lutteur furieux qui étreint fortement et étouffe Antée. C'est un homme vigoureux qui écrase la poitrine à un autre, comme vous embrasseriez votre ami. Ce n'est point un chasseur intrépide qui s'est précipité sur un lion, et qui le dépèce ; c'est un homme tranquille qui tient un lion entre ses jambes, comme un pâtre y tiendrait le gardien de son troupeau. On prétend que les arts ayant passé de l'Égypte en Grèce, ce froid symbolique est un reste du goût de l'hiéroglyphe. Ce qui me paraît difficile à croire. Car à juger du progrès de l'art par la perfection de ces figures, il avait été poussé fort loin, et l'on a de l'expression longtemps avant que d'avoir de l'exécution et du dessein. En peinture, en sculpture, en littérature, la pureté du style, la correction et l'harmonie sont les dernières choses qu'on obtient. Ce n'est qu'un long tems, une longue pratique, un travail opiniâtre, le concours d'un grand nombre d'hommes successivement appliqués qui amènent ces qualités qui ne sont pas du génie, qui l'enchaînent au contraire, et qui tendent plutôt à éteindre qu'à irriter, allumer la verve. D'ailleurs cette conjecture est réfutée par les mêmes sujets tout autrement exécutés par des artistes antérieurs ou même contemporains. Serait-ce que cette tranquillité du dieu, cette facilité à faire de grandes choses en caractériseraient mieux la puissance ? Ou ce que j'incline davantage à croire, ces morceaux n'étaient-ils que purement commémoratifs ? Un catéchisme d'autant plus utile aux peuples qu'on n'avait guère que ce moyen de tenir présentes à leurs esprits et à leurs yeux, et de graver dans leur mémoire, les actions des dieux, la théologie du temps. Au fronton d'un temple, il ne s'agissait pas de montrer comment l'aigle avait enlevé Ganymède, ni comment Hercule avait déchiré le lion, ou étouffé Antée ; mais de lui rappeler par un bas-relief hagiographe et lui conserver le souvenir de ces faits. Si vous me dites que cette froideur d'imitation était une manière de ces siècles, je vous demanderai pourquoi cette manière n'était pas générale ? Pourquoi la figure qu'on adorait au dedans du temple avait de l'expression, de la passion, du mouvement et pourquoi celle qu'on exécutait en bas-relief au dehors en était privée ? Pourquoi ces statues qui peuplaient les jardins publics, le portique, le céramique et autres endroits, ne se recommandaient pas seulement par la correction et la pureté du dessein. Voyez. Adoptez

quelques-unes de ces opinions, ou si toutes vous déplaisent, mettez quelque chose de mieux à leur place.

S'il était permis d'appliquer ici l'idée de l'abbé Galliani que l'histoire moderne n'est que l'histoire ancienne sous d'autres noms, je vous dirais que ces bas-reliefs si purs, si corrects, n'étaient que des copies de mauvais bas-reliefs anciens dont on avait gardé toute la platitude, pour leur conserver la vénération des peuples. Aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas la belle vierge des carmes déchaux qui fait des miracles ; c'est cet informe morceau de pierre noire qui est enfermé dans une boîte près du petit-pont. C'est devant cet indigne fétiche que des cierges allumés brûlent sans cesse. Adieu toute la vénération, toute la confiance de la populace, si l'on substitue à cette figure gothique un chef-d'œuvre de Pigal ou de Falconet. Le prêtre n'aura qu'un moyen de perpétuer une portion de la superstition lucrative ; c'est d'exiger du statuaire d'approcher le plus près qu'il pourra son image de l'image ancienne. C'est une chose bien singulière que le dieu qui fait des prodiges, n'est jamais une belle chose, l'ouvrage d'un habile homme ; mais toujours quelque magot tel qu'on en adore sur la côte du Malabare ou dans la chaumière du caraïbe. Les hommes courent après les vieilles idoles et après les opinions nouvelles.

Cela vient aussi et principalement de ce que les dieux et les saints ne font des miracles que dans des temps d'ignorance et de barbarie, et que leur empire est fini lorsque celui des arts commence. Du reste, je n'ai garde de toucher à cette théorie qui me paraît non seulement très ingénieuse, mais profonde et vraie.

Je vous ai dit que le public avait été partagé sur la supériorité des tableaux de Doyen et de Vien.

Mais comme presque tout le monde se connaît en poésie et que très peu de personnes se connaissent en peinture, il m'a semblé que Doyen avait eu plus d'admirateurs que Vien. Le mouvement frappe plus, que le repos. Il faut du mouvement aux enfants, et il y a beaucoup d'enfants. On sent mieux un forcené qui se déchire le flanc de ses propres mains, que la simplicité, la noblesse, la vérité, la grâce d'une grande figure qui écoute en silence. Peut-être même celle-ci est-elle plus difficile à imaginer, et imaginée, plus difficile à rendre. Ce ne sont pas les morceaux de passion violente qui marquent dans l'acteur qui déclame le talent supérieur, ni le goût exquis dans le spectateur qui frappe des mains.

Dans un de nos entretiens nocturnes, le contraste de ces deux morceaux nous donna, au prince de Gallitzin et à moi, occasion d'agiter quelques questions relatives à l'art, l'une desquelles eut pour objet les groupes et les masses.

J'observai d'abord qu'on confondait à tout moment ces deux expressions, grouper et faire masse, quoiqu'à mon avis, il y eût quelque différence.

De quelque manière que des objets inanimés soient ordonnés, je ne dirai jamais qu'ils groupent ; mais je dirai qu'ils font masse.

De quelque manière que des objets animés soient combinés avec des objets inanimés, je ne dirai jamais qu'ils groupent, mais qu'ils font masse.

De quelque manière que des objets inanimés soient disposés les uns à côté des autres, je ne dirai qu'ils groupent que, quand ils sont liés ensemble par quelque fonction commune. Exemple. Dans le tableau de la manne du Poussin ; ces trois femmes qu'on voit à gauche dont l'une ramasse la manne, la seconde en ramasse aussi, et la troisième debout, en goûte, occupées à des actions diverses, isolées les unes des autres, n'ayant qu'une proximité locale ne groupent point pour moi. Mais cette jeune femme assise à terre qui donne sa mamelle à têter à sa vieille mère et qui console d'une main son enfant qui pleure debout devant elle de la privation d'une nourriture que nature lui a destinée et que la tendresse filiale plus forte que la tendresse maternelle détourne, cette jeune femme groupe avec son fils et sa mère, parce qu'il y a une action commune qui lie cette figure avec les deux autres, et celles-ci avec elles.

Un groupe fait toujours masse ; mais une masse ne fait pas toujours groupe.

Dans le même tableau, cet israélite qui ramasse d'une main et qui en repousse un autre qui en veut au même tas de manne, groupe avec lui.

Je remarquai que dans la composition de Doyen, où il n'y avait que quatorze figures principales, il y avait trois groupes, et que dans celle de Vien où il y en avait trente-trois et peut-être davantage, toutes étaient distribuées par masse et qu'il n'y avait proprement pas un groupe ; que dans le tableau de la manne de Poussin, il y avait plus de cent figures, et à peine quatre groupes, et chacun de ces groupes de deux ou trois figures seulement ; que dans le jugement de Salomon du même artiste, tout était par masse et qu'à l'exception du soldat qui tient l'enfant et qui le menace de son glaive, il n'y avait pas un groupe.

J'observai qu'à la plaine des sablons, un jour de revue, que la curiosité badaude y rassemble cinquante mille hommes, le nombre des masses y seraient infinis en comparaison des groupes ; qu'il en serait de même à l'église, le jour de pâques ; à la promenade, une belle soirée d'été ; au spectacle, un jour de première représentation ; dans les rues, un jour de réjouissance publique ; même au bal de l'opéra, un jour de lundi gras ; et que pour faire naître des groupes dans ces nombreuses assemblées ; il fallait supposer quelque événement subit qui les menaçât. Si au milieu d'une représentation par exemple, le feu prend à la salle ; alors chacun songeant à son salut, le préférant ou le sacrifiant au salut d'un autre, toutes ces figures, le moment précédant attentives, isolées et tranquilles s'agiteront, se précipiteront les unes sur les autres, les femmes s'évanouiront entre les bras de leurs amants ou de leurs époux ; des filles secoureront leurs mères, ou seront secourues par leurs pères, d'autres se précipiteront des loges dans le parterre où je vois des bras tendus pour les recevoir, il y aura des hommes tués, étouffés, foulés aux pieds, une infinité d'incidents et de groupes divers.

Tout étant égal d'ailleurs, c'est le mouvement, le tumulte qui engendre les groupes.

Tout étant égal d'ailleurs, les natures exagérées prennent moins aisément le mouvement que les natures faibles et communes.

Tout étant égal d'ailleurs, il y aura moins de mouvement et moins de groupes dans les compositions où les natures seront exagérées.

D'où je conclus que le véritable imitateur de nature, l'artiste sage était économe de groupes, et que celui qui, sans égard au moment et au sujet, sans égard à son module et à sa nature, cherchait à les multiplier dans sa composition ressemblait à un écolier de rhétorique qui met tout son discours en apostrophes et en figures ; que l'art de grouper était de la peinture perfectionnée ; que la fureur de grouper était de la peinture en décadence, des temps non de la véritable éloquence, mais des temps de la déclamation qui succèdent toujours ; qu'à l'origine de l'art le groupe devait être rare dans les compositions ; et que je n'étais pas éloigné de croire que les sculpteurs qui groupent presque nécessairement, en avaient peut-être donné la première idée aux peintres.

Si mes pensées sont justes, vous les fortifierez de raisons qui ne me viennent pas, et de conjecturales qu'elles sont vous les rendrez évidentes et démontrées. Si elles sont fausses, vous les détruirez.

Vraies ou fausses, le lecteur y gagnera toujours quelque chose (Assézat XI : 29-42).

## Doyen : *Le Miracle des Ardents*

Image : Patrimoinehistoire.fr n.d.<sup>139</sup>



Voici le fait, ou plutôt le compte. L'an 1129, sous le règne de Louis VI, un feu du ciel tomba sur la ville de Paris, il dévorait les entrailles et l'on périssait de la mort la plus cruelle. Ce fléau cessa tout à coup, par l'intercession de sainte Geneviève.

Il n'y a point de circonstances où les hommes soient plus exposés à faire le sophisme, *post hoc ergo prompter hoc*, que celles où les longues calamités et l'inutilité des secours humains les contraignent de recourir au ciel.

Dans le tableau de Doyen, tout au haut de la toile à gauche, on voit la sainte à genoux, portée sur des nuages ; elle a les regards tournés vers un endroit du ciel éclairé au-dessus de

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<sup>139</sup> No page number provided in web document.

sa tête, le geste des bras dirigé vers la terre, elle prie, elle intercède... je vous dirais bien le discours qu'elle tient à Dieu, mais cela est inutile ici.

Au-dessous de la gloire dont l'éclat frappe le visage de la sainte, dans des nuages rougeâtres, l'artiste a placé deux groupes d'anges et de chérubins entre lesquels il y en a qui semblent se disputer l'honneur de porter la houlette de la bergère de Nanterre, petite idée gaie qui va mal avec la tristesse du sujet.

Vers la droite, au-dessus de la sainte et proche d'elle, autre petit groupe de chérubins, autres nuages rougeâtres liés avec les premiers. Ces nuages s'obscurcissent, s'épaississent, descendent et vont couvrir le haut d'une fabrique qui occupe le côté droit de la scène, s'enfonce dans le tableau et fait face au côté gauche ; c'est un hôpital, partie importante du local dont il est difficile de se faire une idée nette, même en la voyant. Elle présente au spectateur hors du tableau la face latérale d'une coupe verticale qui passe par le pied droit de la porte de cet édifice, laisse la porte entière, divise le parvis qui est au-devant et l'escalier qui descend dans la rue ; en sorte que ce parvis et cet escalier divisés forment un grand massif à pic au-dessus d'une terrasse qui règne sur toute la largeur du tableau.

Ainsi le spectateur qui se proposerait de sortir de sa place d'aller à l'hôpital, monterait d'abord sur la terrasse, rencontrant ensuite la face verticale et à pic du massif, il tournerait à gauche, trouverait l'escalier, monterait l'escalier, traverserait le parvis et entrerait dans l'hôpital dont la porte a son seuil de niveau avec ce parvis. On conçoit qu'un autre spectateur placé dans l'enfoncement du tableau, ferait le chemin opposé et qu'on ne commencerait à l'apercevoir qu'à l'endroit où sa hauteur surpasserait la hauteur verticale de l'escalier, qui va toujours en diminuant.

Le premier incident dont on est frappé c'est un frénétique qui s'élance hors de la porte de l'hôpital, sa tête ceinte d'un lambeau et ses bras nus sont portés vers la sainte protectrice. Deux hommes vigoureux et vus par le dos l'arrêtent et le soutiennent.

À droite, sur le parvis, plus sur le devant, c'est un grand cadavre qu'on ne voit que par le dos. Il est tout nu, ses deux longs bras livides, sa tête et sa chevelure pendent vers le pied du massif.

Au-dessous, au lieu le plus bas de la terrasse, à l'angle droit du massif, s'ouvre un égout d'où sortent les deux pieds d'un mort et les deux bouts d'un brancard.

Sur le milieu du parvis, devant la porte de l'hôpital, une mère agenouillée, les bras et les regards tournés vers le ciel et la sainte, la bouche entr'ouverte, l'air éploré, demande le salut de son enfant. Elle a trois de ses femmes autour d'elle ; l'une vue par le dos la soutient sous les bras et joint en même temps ses regards et sa prière aux cris douloureux de sa maîtresse ; la seconde, plus sur le fond et vue de face, a la même action. La troisième accroupie tout à fait au bord du massif, les bras élevés, les mains jointes, implore de son côté.

Derrière celle-ci, debout, l'époux de cette mère désolée, tenant son fils entre ses bras. L'enfant est dévoré par la douleur. Le père affligé a les yeux tournés vers le ciel, *expectando si forte, si sit spes*. La mère a saisi une des mains de son enfant, ainsi la composition présente en cet endroit, au centre, sur le massif, à quelque hauteur au-dessus de la terrasse qui forme la partie antérieure et la plus basse du tableau, un groupe de six figures ; la mère éplorée soutenue par deux de ses femmes, son enfant qu'elle tient par la main, son époux entre les bras duquel l'enfant est tourmenté, et une troisième suivante agenouillée aux pieds de sa maîtresse et de son maître.

Derrière ce groupe, un peu plus vers la gauche, sur le fond au pied du massif, à l'endroit où l'escalier descend et perd de sa hauteur, les têtes suppliantes d'une foule d'habitants.

Tout à fait à la gauche du tableau, sur la terrasse, au pied de l'escalier et du massif, un homme vigoureux qui soutient par dessous les bras un malade nu, un genou en terre, l'autre jambe étendue, le corps renversé en arrière, la tête souffrante, la face tournée vers le ciel, la



bouche pleine de cris, se déchirant le flanc de sa main droite. Celui qui secourt ce malade convulsé est vu par le dos et le profil de sa tête ; il a le cou découvert, les épaules et la tête nues ; il implore de la main gauche et du regard.

Sur la terrasse encore, au pied du même massif, un peu plus sur le fond que le groupe précédent, une femme morte, les pieds étendus du côté de l'homme convulsé, la face tournée vers le ciel, toute la partie supérieure de son corps nue, son bras gauche étendu à terre et entouré d'un gros chapelet, ses cheveux épars, sa tête touchant au massif. Elle est couchée sur un traversin de coutil, de la paille, quelques draperies et un ustensile de ménage. On voit de profil, plus sur le fond, son enfant penché et les regards attachés sur le visage de sa mère, il est frappé d'horreur, ses cheveux se sont dressés sur son front, il cherche si sa mère vit encore, ou s'il n'a plus de mère.

Au-delà de cette femme la terrasse s'affaisse, se rompt, et va en descendant jusqu'à l'angle droit inférieur du massif, à l'égout, à la caverne d'où l'on voit sortir les deux bouts du brancard et les deux jambes du mort qu'on y a jeté.

Voilà la composition de Doyen. Reprenons-la, elle a assez de défauts et de beautés pour mériter un examen détaillé et sévère.

J'oubliais de dire que la partie la plus enfoncée montre l'intérieur d'une ville et quelques édifices particuliers.

Au premier aspect, cette machine est grande, imposante, appelle, arrête, elle pourrait inspirer la terreur ensemble et la pitié. Elle n'inspire que la terreur, et c'est la faute de l'artiste, qui n'a pas su rendre les incidents pathétiques qu'il avait imaginés.

On a de la peine à se faire une idée nette de cet hôpital, de cette fabrique, de ce massif. On ne sait à quoi tient ce louche du local, si ce n'est peut-être au défaut de la perspective, à la bizarrerie occasionnée par la difficulté d'agencer sur une même scène des événements disparates. Dans les catastrophes publiques on voit des gueux aux environs des palais ; mais on ne voit jamais les habitants des palais autour de la demeure des gueux.

De cent personnes, même intelligentes, il n'y en a pas quatre qui aient saisi le local. On aurait évité ce défaut ou par les avis d'un bon architecte, ou par une composition mieux digérée, plus ensemble, plus une. Cette porte n'a point l'air d'une porte, c'est, en dépit de l'inscription, une fenêtre par laquelle on imagine au premier coup d'œil que ce malade s'élance.

Et puis, encore une fois, pourquoi la scène se passe-t-elle à la porte d'un hôpital ? Est-ce la place d'une femme importante ? Car elle paraît telle à son caractère, au luxe de son vêtement, à son cortège, aux marques d'honneurs de son mari ? Je vous devine, Monsieur Doyen ; vous avez imaginé des scènes de terreur isolées, ensuite un local qui pût les réunir. Il vous fallait un massif à pic pour le cadavre que vous vouliez me montrer la tête, les bras et les cheveux pendants. Il vous fallait un égout pour en faire sortir les deux jambes de votre autre cadavre. Je trouve fort bon et l'hôpital et le massif et l'égout ; mais quand vous m'exposerez ensuite à la porte de cet hôpital, sur ce parvis, dans le voisinage de cet égout, au milieu de la plus vile populace, parmi les gueux, le gouverneur de la ville richement vêtu, chamarré de cordons, sa femme en beau satin blanc, je ne pourrai m'empêcher de vous dire : Monsieur Doyen, et les convenances ? Les convenances !

Votre sainte Geneviève est bien posée, bien dessinée, bien colorée, bien drapée, bien en l'air, elle ne fatigue point ces nuages qui la soutiennent ; mais je la trouve, moi et beaucoup d'autres, un peu maniérée. "C'est un assez plat passe-temps que vous vous donnez là...". Il est certain qu'il n'y a pas le moindre vestige d'intérêt, de commisération sur son visage, et qu'on en fera, quand on voudra, une jolie assomption à la manière de Boucher.

Cette guirlande de têtes de chérubins qu'elle a derrière elle et sous ses pieds forme un papillotage de ronds lumineux qui me blessent ; et puis ces anges sont des espèces de cupidons soufflés et transparents ; tant qu'il sera de convention que ces natures idéales sont

de chair et d'os, il faudra les faire de chair et d'os. C'était la même faute dans votre ancien tableau de Diomède et Vénus, la déesse ressemblait à une grande vessie sur laquelle on n'aurait pu s'appliquer avec un peu d'action sans l'exposer à crever avec explosion. Corrigez-vous de ce faire-là ; et songez que, quoique l'ambrosie dont les dieux du paganisme s'enivraient fût une boisson très-légère, et que la vision béatifique dont nos bienheureux se repaissent soit une viande fort creuse, il n'en vient pas moins des êtres dodus, charnus, gras, solides et potelés, et que les fesses de Ganymède et les tétons de la vierge Marie doivent être aussi bons à prendre qu'à aucun giton, qu'à aucune catin de ce monde pervers.

Du reste, le nuage épais qui s'étend sur le haut de vos bâtiments est très-vaporeux ; et toute cette partie supérieure de votre composition est affaiblie, éteinte avec beaucoup d'intelligence. Je ne saurais en conscience vous en dire autant des nuages qui portent votre sainte ; les enfants enveloppés de ces nuages sont légers et minces comme des bulles de savon et les nuages lourds comme des ballons serrés de laine volants.

De ces deux anges qui sont immédiatement au-dessous de la sainte, il y en a un qui regarde l'enfant qui souffre entre les bras de son père, et qui le regarde avec un intérêt très-naturel et très-ingénieusement imaginé, cette idée est d'un homme d'esprit, et l'ange et l'enfant sont deux morveux du même âge. L'intérêt de l'ange est bien, parce que c'est un ange ; mais en toute autre circonstance n'oubliez pas que l'enfant dort au milieu de la tempête. J'ai vu au milieu de l'incendie d'un château les enfants de la maison se rouler dans des tas de bled. Un palais qui s'embrase est moins pour un enfant de quatre ans que la chute d'un château de cartes. C'est un trait de nature que Saurin a bien saisi dans sa pièce du joueur, et je lui en fais compliment.

L'action et la tête de cet homme livide et brûlé de la fièvre, qui s'élance par la fenêtre, ou, puisque vous le voulez, par la porte de l'hôpital, sont on ne peut pas mieux. Ce malade a je ne sais quoi d'égaré dans les yeux, il sourit d'une manière effrayante, c'est sur son visage un mélange d'espérance, de douleur et de joie qui me confond.

Ce malade donc et les deux figures qui groupent avec lui font une belle masse, bien sévère, bien vigoureuse. La tête du malade est du plus grand goût de dessin, de la plus rare expression. Les bras sont dessinés comme les Carraches ; toute la figure dans le style des premiers maîtres d'Italie. La touche en est mâle et spirituelle, c'est la vraie couleur de ces malades, que je n'ai jamais vue ; mais n'importe. On prétend que c'est une imitation de Mignard, mais qu'est-ce que cela me fait ? *quisque suos patimur manes*, dit Rameau le fou. Pour ces deux hommes qui le retiennent, je me trompe fort s'ils ne sont d'une telle proportion que si vous les acheviez, leurs pieds descendraient au-dessous du massif sur lequel vous les avez posés ; du reste, ils font bien ce qu'ils font, ils sont sagement drapés, bien coloriés, seulement, je vous le répète, ils semblent moins empêcher un malade de sortir par une porte que de se jeter par une fenêtre. C'est l'effet d'un local bizarre.

J'en suis fâché, Monsieur Doyen, mais la partie la plus intéressante de votre composition, cette mère éplorée, ces suivantes qui l'entourent, ce père qui tient son enfant, tout cela est manqué net.

Premièrement, ces trois femmes et leur maîtresse font un amas confus de têtes, de bras, de jambes, de corps, un chaos où l'on se perd et qu'on ne saurait regarder longtemps. La tête de la mère qui implore pour son fils, bien coiffée, cheveux bien ajustés, est désagréable de physionomie, sa couleur n'a point assez de consistance, il n'y a point d'os sous cette peau, elle manque d'action, de mouvement, d'expression, elle a trop peu de douleur, en dépit de la larme que vous lui faites verser. Ses bras sont de verre colorié, ses jambes ne sont pas indiquées. La draperie de satin dont elle est vêtue forme une grande tache lumineuse, vous avez eu beau l'éteindre après coup, elle n'en est pas restée moins discordante, son éclat n'en éteint pas moins les chairs. Cette grande suivante que je vois par le dos et qui la soutient, est tournée, contournée de la manière la plus déplaisante ; le bras dont elle embrasse sa maîtresse

est gourde ; on ne sait sur quoi elle pose. Et puis c'est le plus énorme, le plus monstrueux cul de femme qu'on ait jamais vu ; ces effrayants culs de bacchantes, que vous avez faits pour M Watelet n'en approchent pas.

Cependant la draperie de cette maussade figure est bien jetée, et dessine bien le nu, ce bras gourde est de bonne couleur et bien empâté, il est seulement un peu équivoque et semble appartenir à la figure verte qui est à côté. Celle-ci qui aide la première dans ses fonctions, bien sur son plan, est belle, tout à fait belle de caractère et d'expression, mais il faut la restituer au Dominiquin. Pour celle qui est accroupie, elle est ignoble, il y a pis, elle ressemble en laid à sa maîtresse, et je gagerais qu'elles ont été prises d'après le même modèle, et puis la couleur de la tête en est aussi sans consistance. à la chute des reins, qu'est-ce que cette petite lumière ? Ne voyez-vous pas qu'elle nuit à l'effet et qu'il fallait l'éteindre ou l'étendre ? Cet enfant est bien dans son maillot, il se tourmente bien, il crie bien, seulement il grimace un peu. Je ne demande pas à son père plus d'expression qu'il n'en a, pour un peu plus de dignité, c'est autre chose ; on prétend qu'il a moins l'air de l'époux de cette femme que d'un de ses serviteurs, c'est l'avis général. Pour moi je lui trouve la simplicité, l'espèce de rusticité, la bonhomie domestique des gens de son temps. J'aime ses cheveux crépus et j'en suis content, sans compter qu'il a du caractère, et qu'il est on ne saurait plus vigoureusement colorié, trop peut-être, ainsi que l'enfant. Ce groupe avançant excessivement, chasse la mère de son plan, de manière qu'on doute qu'elle puisse apercevoir la sainte à laquelle elle s'adresse ; et cette mère avec ses suivantes chassées en avant, font paraître les figures d'en bas colossales.

Il n'y a qu'une voix sur votre malade qui se déchire le flanc, c'est une figure de l'école du Carrache, et pour la couleur, et pour le dessin, et pour l'expression. Sa tête et son action font frémir, mais sa tête est belle, c'est une douleur terrible, mais qui n'a rien de hideux. Il souffre, il souffre à l'excès, mais sans grimacer. L'homme qui le soutient est très-beau, seulement le sommet de sa tête, son chignon, son épaule, sont un peu de cuivre ; vous l'avez voulu chaud, et vous l'avez fait de brique. Je crains encore que ce groupe ne vienne pas assez sur le devant, ou que les autres ne s'enfoncent pas autant qu'ils le devraient.

Pour cette femme étendue morte sur de la paille avec son chapelet autour du bras, plus je la vois, plus je la trouve belle. ô la belle, la grande, l'intéressante figure ! Comme elle est simple ! Comme elle est bien drapée ! Comme elle est bien morte ! Quel grand caractère elle a ! Quoique renversée en arrière et son visage vu de raccourci, comme elle conserve ce grand caractère et sa beauté, et comme elle les conserve dans la position la plus défavorable ! Si cette figure vous appartenait, et qu'il n'y eût que ce mérite dans tout votre tableau, vous ne seriez pas un artiste commun.

Elle est d'une belle pâte, d'une bonne couleur, mais sa draperie verte et forte ne contribue pas peu à coller sa tête au pied du mur. On dit qu'elle est empruntée de la peste du Poussin ; qu'est-ce que cela me fait encore ? Les pailles éparses autour d'elle, ces draperies, ce coussin de coutil, tout cela est large et bien peint. Je ne sais ce qu'ils entendent par une manière de faire lourde, qu'ils appellent allemande ; *faciuntne nimis intelligendo, ut nihil intelligant*.

On ne donne pas plus d'expression, on ne montre pas mieux l'incertitude et l'effroi, on ne peint pas avec plus de vigueur, on ne fait rien de mieux que cet enfant qui est dans la demi-teinte penché sur elle. Ses cheveux hérissés sont beaux ; il est bien dessiné, bien touché.

Lorsque je dis à Cochin : cette terrasse ne serait pas plus chaude quand Louthembourg ou quelque autre paysagiste de profession l'aurait faite... il me répond : il est vrai, mais c'est tant pis... ami Cochin, vous pouvez avoir raison, mais je ne vous entends pas.

C'est une belle idée, bien poétique, que ces deux grands pieds nus qui sortent de la caverne ou de l'égout ; d'ailleurs ils sont beaux, bien dessinés, bien coloriés, bien vrais. Mais le haut de la caverne est vide, et si l'on voulait me faire concevoir qu'elle regorge de

cadavres, il aurait fallu l'annoncer. Il n'en est pas de ces deux pieds comme des deux bras que le Rembrandt a élevés du fond de la tombe du Lazare, les circonstances sont différentes. Rembrandt est sublime en ne me montrant que deux bras ; vous l'auriez été en me montrant plus de deux pieds. Je ne saurais imaginer plein un lieu que je vois vide.

C'est encore une belle idée, bien poétique, que cet homme dont la tête, les longs bras nus et la chevelure pendent le long du massif. Je sais que quelques spectateurs pusillanimes en ont détourné leurs regards d'horreur, mais qu'est-ce que cela me fait à moi, qui ne le suis point, et qui me suis plu à voir dans Homère des corneilles rassemblées autour d'un cadavre, lui arracher les yeux de la tête en battant les ailes de joie ? Où attendrais-je des scènes d'horreur, des images effrayantes, si ce n'est dans une bataille, une famine, une peste, une épidémie ? Si vous eussiez consulté ces gens à petit goût raffiné qui craignent des sensations trop fortes, vous eussiez passé la brosse sur votre frénétique qui s'élance de l'hôpital, sur ce malade qui se déchire les flancs au pied de votre massif ; et moi j'aurais brûlé le reste de votre composition, j'en excepte toutefois la femme au chapelet, à qui que ce soit qu'elle appartienne.

Mais, mon ami, quand nous laisserions là un moment le peintre Doyen pour nous entretenir d'autre chose, croyez-vous qu'il y eût si grand mal ? Tout en écrivant l'endroit du discours de Diomède que je viens de citer, je recherchais la cause des différents jugements que j'en ai entendu porter. Il présente à l'imagination des cadavres, des yeux arrachés de la tête, des corneilles qui battent leurs ailes de joie.

Un cadavre n'a rien qui dégoûte, la peinture en expose dans ses compositions sans blesser la vue. La poésie emploie ce mot sans fin. Pourvu que les chairs ne se dissolvent point, que les parties putréfiées ne se séparent point, qu'il ne fourmille point de vers et qu'il garde ses formes, le bon goût dans l'un et l'autre art ne rejettera point cette image. Il n'en est pas ainsi des yeux arrachés de la tête. Je ferme les miens pour ne pas voir ces yeux tirillés par le bec d'une corneille, ces fibres sanglantes, purulentes, moitié attachées à l'orbite de la tête du cadavre, moitié pendantes du bec de l'oiseau vorace. Cet oiseau cruel battant les ailes de joie est horriblement beau. Quel doit donc être l'effet de l'ensemble d'un pareil tableau ? Divers, selon l'endroit auquel l'imagination s'arrêtera. Mais sur quel endroit ici l'imagination doit-elle se reposer de préférence ? Sera-ce sur le cadavre ? Non, c'est une image commune. Sur les yeux arrachés hors de la tête du cadavre ? Non, puisqu'il y a une image plus rare, celle de l'oiseau qui bat les ailes de joie. Aussi cette image est-elle présentée la dernière, aussi présentée la dernière sauve-t-elle le dégoût de l'image qui précède ; aussi y a-t-il bien de la différence entre ces images rangées dans l'ordre qui suit : je vois les corneilles qui battent les ailes autour de ton cadavre et qui t'arrachent les yeux de la tête...ou rangées dans l'ordre du poète : je vois les corneilles rassemblées autour de ton cadavre, t'arracher les yeux de la tête, en battant les ailes de joie. Regardez bien, mon ami, et vous sentirez que c'est ce dernier phénomène qui vous occupe et qui vous dérobe l'horreur du reste. Il y a donc un art inspiré par le bon goût dans la manière de distribuer les images dans le discours et de sauver leurs effets, un art de fixer l'œil de l'imagination à l'endroit où l'on veut. C'est celui de Timante qui voile la tête d'Agamemnon ; c'est celui de Teniers, qui ne vous laisse apercevoir que la tête d'un homme accroupi derrière une haie ; c'est celui d'Homère dans le passage cité. Il ne consiste pas seulement dans la succession des idées, le choix des expressions y fait beaucoup, d'expressions fortes ou faibles, simples ou figurées, lentes ou rapides ; c'est là surtout que la magie de la prosodie qui arrête ou précipite la déclamation, a son grand jeu. ô les pauvres gens que la plupart de nos faiseurs de poétiques... .

Je trouve seulement le cadavre de Doyen d'un livide un peu monotone ; la putréfaction ne se fait pas d'une manière aussi uniforme ; elle est accompagnée d'une multitude d'accidents, de taches variées à l'infini. Il lui fallait plus de relief, il est un peu plat. C'est très-bien fait au peintre de l'avoir placé dans la demi-teinte.

Je reviens sur son frénétique qui se déchire les flancs ; la convulsion y serpente de la tête aux pieds, on la voit et dans les muscles du visage, et dans ceux du cou et de la poitrine, et dans les bras, le ventre, le bas-ventre, les cuisses, les jambes, les pieds ; c'est une très-belle, très-parfaite imitation. Ils accusent la jambe étendue et son pied d'être un peu trop forts. Je n'en sais pas assez, pour être ou n'être pas de leur avis ; le pied m'en paraît seulement informe. Mais ce que j'estime surtout dans la composition de Doyen, c'est qu'à travers son fracas tout y est dirigé à un seul et même but, avec une action et un mouvement propre à chaque figure, toutes ont un rapport commun à la sainte : rapport dont on retrouve des vestiges même dans les morts. Cette belle femme qui vient d'expirer au pied du massif a expiré en invoquant. Le cadavre effrayant qui pend du massif avait les bras élevés vers le ciel quand il est tombé mort, comme on le voit.

Malgré cela, je ne saurais me dissimuler que l'ouvrage de Doyen n'ait l'air tourmenté, qu'il n'y ait ni naturel ni facilité dans la distribution des figures et des incidents, et qu'on n'y sente partout l'homme qui s'est battu les flancs. Je m'explique : il y a dans toute composition un chemin, une ligne qui passe par les sommités des masses ou des groupes, traversant différents plans, s'enfonçant ici dans la profondeur du tableau, là s'avancant sur le devant. Si cette ligne, que j'appellerai ligne de liaison, se plie, se replie, se tortille, se tourmente, si ses circonvolutions sont petites, multipliées, rectilinéaires, anguleuses, la composition sera louche, obscure ; l'œil irrégulièrement promené, égaré dans un labyrinthe, saisira difficilement la liaison. Si au contraire elle ne serpente pas assez, si elle parcourt un long espace sans trouver aucun objet qui la rompe, la composition sera rare et décousue. Si elle s'arrête, la composition laissera un vide, un trou. Si l'on sent ce défaut et qu'on remplisse le vide ou trou d'un accessoire inutile, on remédiera à un défaut par un autre.

Un exemple excellent à proposer aux élèves de la distribution la plus plate et la plus vicieuse, de la ligne de liaison la plus ridiculement rompue, c'est le tableau de l'agonie de Jésus-Christ au jardin des oliviers, que Parocel a exposé cette année. Ses figures sont placées sur trois lignes parallèles, en sorte qu'on pourrait dépecer son tableau en trois autres mauvais tableaux.

Le Miracle des Ardents de Doyen n'est pas irrépréhensible de ce côté : la ligne de liaison y est anfractueuse, pliée, repliée, tortillée. On a de la peine à la suivre ; elle est quelquefois équivoque, ou elle s'arrête tout court, ou il faut bien de la complaisance à l'œil pour en poursuivre le chemin. Une composition bien ordonnée n'aura jamais qu'une seule vraie, unique ligne de liaison ; et cette ligne conduira et celui qui la regarde et celui qui tente de la décrire.

Autre défaut et peut-être le plus considérable de tous, c'est qu'on y désire une meilleure connaissance de la perspective, des plans plus distincts, plus de profondeur ; tout cela n'a pas assez d'air et de champ, ne recule pas, n'avance pas assez. Et le malade qui s'élance de l'hôpital, et la mère agenouillée qui supplie, et les trois suivantes qui la servent, et le mari qui tient l'enfant, tous ces objets forment un chaos, une masse compacte de figures. Si, sur le fond, derrière le père, vous imaginez un plan vertical, parallèle à la toile, et sur le devant un autre plan parallèle au premier, vous formerez une boîte qui n'aura pas six pieds de profondeur, dans laquelle toutes les scènes de Doyen se passeront et où ses malades plus entassés que dans nos hôpitaux périront étouffés.

Ce qui achève d'augmenter la confusion, la discordance, la fatigue de l'œil, ce sont des tons jaunâtres trop voisins et trop répétés : les nuages sont jaunâtres, la carnation des hommes jaunâtre, les draperies ou jaunes ou d'un rouge mêlé de teintes jaunes ; le manteau de la figure principale d'un beau jonquille, les ornements en sont d'or, il y a des écharpes tirant sur le jaune, la grande suivante au derrière énorme est jaune. En faisant tout participer de la même teinte, on évite la discordance et l'on tombe dans la monotonie. Il faut être bien malheureux pour avoir ces deux défauts à la fois.

S'il est vrai, comme on le reproche à Doyen, et comme il aurait un peu de peine à se justifier, qu'il ait emprunté la distribution, la marche générale de sa machine d'une composition de Rubens où l'on prétend que l'ordonnance est la même, je ne suis plus surpris du défaut d'air et de plans ; il est presque inséparable de cette sorte de plagiat. L'estampe vous donnera bien la position des masses, la distribution des groupes, elle vous indiquera même le lieu des ombres et des lumières, à peu près le moyen de séparer les objets, mais ce moyen sera très-difficile à transporter sur la toile ; c'est le secret de l'inventeur ; il n'a imaginé son ensemble que d'après une technique qui est le sien et qui ne sera jamais bien le vôtre. Il est difficile d'exécuter un tableau d'après une description donnée et détaillée, il l'est peut-être encore davantage de l'exécuter d'après une estampe. De là l'intelligence du clair-obscur manquée, rien qui s'éloigne, se rapproche, s'unisse, se sépare, s'avance, se recule, se lie, se fuie ; plus d'harmonie, plus de netteté, plus d'effet, plus de magie. De là, des figures poussées trop en avant seront trop grandes, et d'autres repoussées trop en arrière seront trop petites ; ou, plus communément, toutes s'entassant les unes sur les autres, plus d'étendue, plus d'air, plus de champ, nulle profondeur, confusion d'objets découpés et artistement collés les uns sur les autres, vingt scènes diverses se passant comme entre deux planches, entre deux boiseries qui ne seront séparées que de l'épaisseur de la toile et de la bordure. Ajoutez que tandis que le défaut d'air et de perspective porte les figures du devant vers le fond et du fond vers le devant, par une seconde malédiction elles sembleront encore chassées de la gauche vers la droite et de la droite vers la gauche, ou retenues comme par force dans l'enceinte de la toile ; en sorte que cet obstacle levé, on craindrait que tout n'échappât, et n'allât se disperser dans l'espace environnant.

Il y a de la couleur, que dis-je ? Le tableau de Doyen est même très-vigoureusement colorié, mais il manque d'harmonie, et quoiqu'il soit chaud de toute part, on ne saurait le regarder longtemps sans être peiné, mais c'est principalement au groupe des six figures placées sur le massif que cette peine se fait sentir, c'est un grand papillotage insupportable. Il n'en est pas ainsi de la partie inférieure ou de la terrasse, ni de la partie vaporeuse et supérieure.

Autre défaut, c'est que la fabrique est d'architecture grecque ou romaine, et que l'action se passe sous le règne de l'architecture gothique, licence inutile. Du reste, elle est d'un bon ton de couleur.

Avec tout ce que je viens de reprendre dans le tableau de Doyen, il est beau et très-beau ; il est chaud, il est plein d'imagination et de verve ; il y a du dessin, de l'expression, du mouvement, beaucoup, mais beaucoup de couleur, et il produit un grand effet. L'artiste s'y montre un homme et un homme qu'on n'attendait pas ; c'est sans contredit la meilleure de ses productions. Qu'on expose ce tableau en quelque endroit du monde que ce soit, qu'on lui oppose quelque maître ancien ou moderne qu'on voudra, la comparaison ne lui ôtera pas tout mérite. Vous en direz tout ce qu'il vous plaira, Monsieur le chevalier Pierre, si ce morceau n'est que d'un écolier, fort à la vérité, qu'êtes-vous ? Est-ce que vous croyez que nous avons oublié la platitude de ce Mercure et de cette Aglaure que vous refaisiez sans cesse et qui était toujours à refaire, et ce crucifiement médiocre, toujours médiocre, quoique copié d'une des plus sublimes compositions du Carrache ? Il y a des hommes d'une jalousie bien impudente et bien basse. Monsieur le chevalier, acquérez le droit d'être dédaigneux et ne le soyez pas ; c'est le mieux.

Mais savez-vous, mon ami, la raison de cette rage de Greuze, de ce déchaînement de Pierre, contre ce pauvre Doyen ? C'est que Michel qui tient l'école laissera bientôt vacante une place à laquelle ils prétendent tous. Doyen a été suffisamment vengé de ses critiques par le suffrage public et le témoignage honorable de son académie qui sur son tableau l'a nommé adjoint à professeur.

Je crois avoir déjà remarqué dans quelques-uns de mes papiers, où je m'étais proposé de montrer qu'une nation ne pouvait avoir qu'un beau siècle, et que dans ce beau siècle un grand homme n'avait qu'un moment pour naître, que toute belle composition, tout véritable talent en peinture, en sculpture, en architecture, en éloquence, en poésie, supposait un certain tempérament de raison et d'enthousiasme, de jugement et de verve, tempérament rare et momentané, équilibre sans lequel les compositions sont extravagantes ou froides. Il y a un écueil à craindre pour Doyen, c'est qu'échauffé par son morceau du Miracle des ardents, dont la poésie a plutôt fait le succès que le technique (car à trancher le mot, en peinture ce n'est qu'une très-magnifique ébauche), il ne passe la vraie mesure, que sa tête ne s'exalte trop, et qu'il ne se jette dans l'outré, il est sur la ligne, un pas de travers de plus et le voilà dans le fracas, dans le désordre. Vous aimez encore mieux, me direz-vous, l'extravagant que le plat ; et moi aussi ; mais il y a un milieu entre l'un et l'autre, qui nous convient à tous les deux davantage.

J'ai vu l'artiste ; vous ne le croiriez pas, il joue la modestie à merveille ; il fait tout ce qu'il peut pour réprimer la bouffissure de l'orgueil qui le gagne ; il reçoit l'éloge avec plaisir, mais il a la force de le tempérer ; il regrette sincèrement le temps qu'il a perdu avec les grands et les femmes, ces deux pestes du talent ; il se propose d'étudier. Ce dont il aime surtout à s'entendre louer, c'est de son faire, qui n'est d'aucun atelier moderne. En effet son style et son pinceau ne sont qu'à lui ; il ne veut s'endetter qu'à Raphaël, le Guide, le Titien, le Dominiquin, Le Sueur, le Poussin, gens riches que nous lui permettrons d'interroger, de consulter, d'appeler à son secours, mais non de voler. Qu'il apprenne de l'un à dessiner, de l'autre à colorier, de celui-ci à ordonner sa scène, à établir ses plans, à lier ses incidents, la magie de la lumière et des ombres, l'effet de l'harmonie, la convenance, l'expression ; à la bonne heure.

Le public paraît avoir regardé le tableau de Doyen comme le plus beau morceau du Salon, et je n'en suis pas surpris. Une chose d'expression forte, un démoniaque qui se tord les bras, qui écume de la bouche, dont les yeux sont égarés, sera mieux senti de la multitude qu'une belle femme nue qui sommeille tranquillement et qui vous livre ses épaules et ses reins ; la multitude n'est pas faite pour recevoir toutes les chaînes imperceptibles qui émanent de cette figure, en saisir la mollesse, le naturel, la grâce, la volupté. C'est vous, c'est moi qui nous laissons blesser, envelopper dans ces filets ; c'est nous qu'ils retiennent invinciblement :

*Aeterno devincti vulnere amoris.*

Mais est-il bien sûr qu'il n'y ait pas autant de verve dans la première scène de Térence et dans l'Antinoüs que dans aucune scène de Molière, dans aucun morceau de Michel-Ange ? J'ai prononcé là-dessus autrefois un peu légèrement. à tout moment je donne dans l'erreur, parce que la langue ne me fournit pas à propos l'expression de la vérité.

J'abandonne une thèse, faute de mots qui rendent bien mes raisons ; j'ai au fond de mon cœur une chose, et j'en dis une autre. Voilà l'avantage de l'homme retiré dans la solitude, il se parle, il s'interroge, il s'écoute et s'écoute en silence, sa sensation secrète se développe peu à peu, et il trouve les vraies voix qui dessillent les yeux des autres, et qui les entraînent.

*O rus, quando ego te adspiciam ?*

Vien et Doyen ont retouché leurs tableaux en place. Je ne les ai point vus, mais allez à Saint-Roch ; et quoi qu'ait pu faire Doyen, je gage que son tableau, après vous avoir appelé par une bonne couleur générale, vous repoussera toujours par la discordance. Je gage que son effet vous fatiguera ; qu'il n'y a point de plans, mais point ; rien de décidé ; qu'on ne sait

toujours où posent les figures du parvis ; que cette grosse suivante à énorme derrière rouge, au lieu d'être large, continue d'être monstrueuse et mal assise ; qu'il n'y a point de repos, que vous y ressentiez partout *la furia francese* ; qu'à juger de la figure qui tient le petit enfant, par le plan qu'on lui suppose, elle est d'une grandeur colossale, etc., etc. Ces vices ne se corrigent pas à la pointe du pinceau. *Ma, comé ogni medaglia ha il suo reverso*, le bas de son tableau sera toujours beau, la couleur en sera toujours chaude, vigoureuse et vraie. Le groupe des deux figures dont l'une se déchire les flancs (quoiqu'il y ait peut-être dans Rubens ou ailleurs un possédé que Doyen ait regardé), sera toujours d'un grand maître ; que s'il a pris cette figure, c'est *ut conditor et non ut interpres*, et que ce Greuze qui lui en fait le reproche n'a qu'à se taire, car il ne serait pas difficile de lui cogner le nez sur certains tableaux flamands où l'on retrouve des attitudes, des incidents, des expressions, trente accessoires dont il a su profiter, sans que ses ouvrages en perdent rien de leur mérite.

Le bas du tableau de Doyen annonce vraiment un grand talent. Qu'il mette un peu de plomb dans sa tête ; que ses compositions deviennent plus sages, plus décidées ; que les figures en soient mieux assises ; qu'il n'entasse plus tête sur tête ; qu'il étudie plus les grands maîtres ; qu'il s'éprenne davantage de la simplicité ; qu'il soit plus harmonieux, plus sévère, moins fougueux, moins éclatant, et vous verrez le coin qu'il tiendra dans l'école française. Il a du feu, mais trop de petits effets qui nuisent à l'ensemble ; il perd à être détaillé, mais il sent, mais il sent fortement, c'est un grand point. Laissez-le aller, vous dis-je.

Quoique la partie supérieure de son tableau n'aille pas de pair avec l'inférieure, la gloire cependant est soignée, contre l'usage, qui la néglige ordinairement, *hic quoque sunt superis sua jura* ; et le tout rappelle bien mon épigraphe :

...*Multoque in rebus acerbis*  
*Acrius advertunt animos ad Religionem.*

Le besoin que Doyen et Vien ont senti de retoucher leurs tableaux en place doit apprendre aux artistes à se ménager dans l'atelier la même exposition, les mêmes lumières, le même local qu'ils doivent occuper.

Vien a moins perdu à Saint-Roch que Doyen. Vien y est resté simple, sage et harmonieux ; Doyen fatigant, papillotant, inégal, vigoureux ; les figures du bas vous y paraîtront beaucoup trop fortes pour les autres.

Donnez à Vien la verve de Doyen qui lui manque ; donnez à Doyen le faire de Vien qu'il n'a pas, et vous aurez deux grands artistes. Mais cela est peut-être impossible, du moins cette alliance ne s'est point encore vue ; et le premier de tous les peintres n'est que le second dans toutes les parties de la peinture.

Allez voir le tableau de Doyen, le soir en été, et voyez-le de loin ; allez voir celui de Vien, le même dans la même saison, et voyez-le de près ou de loin, comme il vous plaira ; restez-y jusqu'à la nuit close, et vous verrez la dégradation de toutes les parties suivre exactement la dégradation de la lumière naturelle, et la scène entière s'affaiblir comme la scène de l'univers, lorsque l'astre qui l'éclairait a disparu. Le crépuscule naît dans sa composition, comme dans la nature (Assézat XI : 164-181).